天地無用! in LOVE 2

遥かなる想い

ねぎしひろし

イラスト 大和田直之

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Tenchi Muyo! in LOVE 2

Eternal Memory (Harukanaru Omoi)

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For more: visit tenchimuyotranslationblog.blogspot.com

After parting from you,

Morning comes, Daylight comes, Night comes...

Morning comes, Daylight comes, Night comes...

I believed that time Would resolve these feelings. I believed that eventually, with a peaceful heart, I would drift into an eternal sleep...

Though there is a sense of lingering regret, I have no remorse. Though it is painful now, I believed that surely, in the stillness, I would be able to pray for your happiness...

And yet—look at me now.

What is this sorrow? Small, lonely grains of ice, Crossing hundreds of ages, Crossing thousands of nights, Bit by bit, Bit by bit, Growing larger, harder, and colder...

What should I do with this sorrow? With what should I fill this loneliness...?

Someone, tell me. Am I no longer Allowed to desire anything? Am I not even allowed to dream?

Because, even though my feelings Are right here, so vividly, Must they all Be buried away As things of the past?

Someone, answer me. What should I do with this sorrow? With what should I fill this loneliness...? It has grown so very, so very Large, and hard, and cold. With what can I melt this heart...?

Even the camellias in full bloom Offer no comfort to me now.

Prologue

A man was walking through the deep, green mountains. On his back, he carried a large rucksack, likely containing all of his worldly possessions. Perhaps he was a demobilized soldier. And yet, in his stride, there was no sign of relief at finally returning to his hometown, nor any impatience to see the healthy faces of his family. He was simply shrouded in a profound state of exhaustion.

The season was autumn. However, neither the changing colors of the leaves nor the trees bearing small fruit seemed to bring any pleasure to the man's eyes. It wasn't that he loathed the richness of nature, but rather that the beautiful vibrance perhaps only deepened the sorrow in his weary heart.

At that moment—*splash!*—the small sound of water echoed from somewhere. The man pushed through the grove, heading toward the sound. *Splash! Splash!* Was a small bird bathing in a spring? The small sounds of water continued without pause. Before long, he began to see bright sunlight shining on the other side of the deep greenery. "There it is!" The man quickened his pace toward the light.

Was it a small spring? Or perhaps a pool in a river? Either way, his throat was parched after walking for hours. All he wanted was a single sip of water.

As he emerged from the grove with those thoughts in mind, a wide-open space spread out before him, almost anticlimactically. Sure enough, it was a large lake. The man stood there for a while, dazed.

To a man who had been walking along a dark, deep mountain path where even the sunlight through the trees barely reached, the glittering surface of the water was blindingly bright. The refreshing scent of water tickled the nostrils of the man who had been walking through the damp, heavy fragrance of the woods.

The man stood rooted to the spot, feeling as though he had finally escaped the darkness he had been walking through for so long. Yes, the man was utterly exhausted, both in body and soul.

Splash! Splash! The one splashing the water was a little girl. She was splashing about and letting out innocent laughter, as if trying to scoop up the light reflecting off the shimmering surface.

The man, unintentionally smiling at her cuteness, instinctively placed his hands on his softening cheeks—as if surprised by the emotion he had inadvertently let slip.

"Cute? A little girl innocently splashing water... that’s right, she’s cute... heh... I see. I still had a heart left in me that could think something is cute."

Something hot touched the man's fingertips. It was... a tear.

"Mister, why are you crying?" Before he knew it, the girl who had been playing in the water was standing beside him, looking up at him. The man looked back at the purity in her eyes in silence, and the girl said, somewhat shyly:

"Um, you know, if you don't have a house to go home to, you can come to mine. My house is that shrine over there. Grandpa always says: it's a difficult time right now, so we have to help people who are in trouble..."

The man continued to look at the girl in silence, until eventually, she took his hand and urged him forward.

"Come on, let's go."

Hand in hand, the man and the girl began walking toward the shrine.

This is a story of Okayama, in the 20th year of the Showa era (1945).

Chapter 1:

19 Years Old • Midsummer Love

Reeeeee-ng... Reeeeee-ng...

When I drifted awake, that sound was already burned into my ears, echoing.

What was that? Such a mournful sound. It feels nostalgic, yet painful... What was it again?

Right! The sound of a wind chime.

Reeeeee-ng... Reeeeee-ng...

...A wind chime? In this season? No, come to think of it, it's terribly hot. Like midsummer. My body feels heavy.

Thump, thump, thump, thump... Thump, thump, thump, thump...

The sound of a kitchen knife... maybe? Is it Sas...-chan? What time is it now? The clock is...

"Ugh...?"

As I reached out, I felt a distinct, smooth texture.

Tatami? Did I fall asleep in the sitting room?

No, that’s not it. I’m properly tucked into a futon.

Where was this?

I look up at the square ceiling.

I have absolutely no memory of this ceiling; it looks cheaply made, as if covered in plain white wallpaper.

There are matching yellow and green checkered curtains on the window above my head and on the glass door leading to the balcony on the right, but I didn't recognize those at all either.

And my body feels terribly heavy.

Meen, min, min, min, min... Zee—, zee, zee, zee, zee...

Cicadas... huh? Is it... summer? Right now?

What's wrong with me? Is it the heat?

Everything feels... hazy.

"Tenchi! If you don't get up soon, you're going to be late!"

The sliding door rattled open, and a girl peeked her head in.

"Oh, if you were awake, you should have at least answered me."

"...Haruna?"

"Hmm? What's wrong? You have such a sleepy look on your face. How can you sleep so long when it's this hot? Look, it's another beautiful day!"

As she spoke, Haruna slid the window wide open. A single white glass wind chime hung under the eaves.

That's right. We bought that together at a night stall last week. Thinking it might make things feel a bit cooler... Why had I forgotten that?

Haruna continued by drawing back the curtains of the glass door. It's so bright!

That's right. Haruna worked hard to sew these curtains after buying some cheap fabric. Why did I think I didn't recognize them?

Yes, that's it. It's midsummer. Every night has been a sweltering tropical night. Something is wrong with me. Maybe the heat has made me go senile.

"What's the matter, Tenchi? You're just spacing out."

"Ah... yeah. I just feel a bit sluggish... Maybe it's summer fatigue."

"Are you okay?" Haruna peered into my face with concern. That's right. This is Haruna's and my apartment. Why did I feel like I was sleeping in a bed? Is it because Haruna is always saying it? At the department store furniture section: "I'd love to live in a house where we could put a stylish bed like this..."

"Hey, Tenchi! Are you feeling sick? Do you want to skip summer school today?" Haruna placed her hand gently on my forehead. Her hand was cool and smooth, and it felt good.

"No, I'll go. I'm fine. I have an assignment to turn in today, too..."

"Are you really okay? Don't overdo it."

"I'm fine, I'm fine. You're such a worrywart, Haruna."

Partly to reassure Haruna, who was still looking at me with concern, I sprang out of the futon with vigor.

"Alright! I'll wash my face and freshen up."

"Hehehe... Oh, Tenchi. Breakfast is ready."

Haruna finally replied with a bright smile.

I stepped out into the hallway; to the right, and then on the left, are the toilet, the sink, and the bathroom. I know it well. Of course I do. It's my home.

As I was about to turn the faucet in the washroom, I caught sight of the mirror.

"Eh?"

Did I always look like this? Unconsciously, I pressed my right palm against my face as if to confirm it. I stared into the mirror.

"Tenchi, the towel... what, are you entranced by your own face?"

Haruna, who had come over to hand me a towel, laughed when she saw me standing frozen in front of the mirror.

"Haruna... do I look strange today?"

"You *are* strange. You've been spacing out since morning."

"No, not that. Doesn't my face look strange?"

"Your face? Hmm, your eyes might be a bit puffy since you just woke up? But it’s okay, it’s okay. You’re my handsome Tenchi."

"Wha... idiot!" I couldn't help but blush at Haruna's words.

"Hehehe... Tenchi, you're turning red. So cute. Come on, hurry up or your breakfast will get cold."

Pushing the towel into my hands, Haruna disappeared into the kitchen across the hall.

Once Haruna was gone, I stole another look into the mirror.

It is certainly my face.

I believe so.

But I feel like something is different...

"What am I thinking? How ridiculous." Saying this aloud, I turned the faucet on full blast and washed my face. I scrubbed my face roughly, over and over, until it almost hurt. If I didn't, an unbearable anxiety seemed to mount within me.

Why?

Why am I so anxious?

Splash, splash, splash, splash. Splash, splash, splash, splash.

"Tenchi? What are you doing?"

Haruna's voice from the kitchen finally brought me back to my senses. I really am out of it today.

It must be the weather. It's not just the heat.

The air feels stagnant somehow.

Meen, min, min, min, min... Zee—, zee, zee, zee, zee...

The cicadas are so noisy.

"Tenchi, let's eat?" Haruna smiled, sticking her head out from the kitchen into the hallway. The nice smell of miso soup hit my nose, and I suddenly felt hungry.

"Sorry. I'm coming now."

On the table of our kitchen-dining area—which couldn't be called spacious—sat freshly cooked white rice, wakame miso soup, grilled salmon, rolled omelet, blanched spinach, and pickles. In a single-flower vase, there was one bright red flower... What was that flower called again?

"I went with a Japanese style today. Now, sit down, sit down."

Urged by Haruna, I took my seat.

"Let’s eat."

"Yes, enjoy."

The two of us began to eat. Haruna talked about the grandmother next door and the large, shaggy dog kept in the house across from the apartment. I nodded along. I know all of it. The kind grandmother next door is hard of hearing, and there's no end to the funny stories caused by her misunderstandings. The shaggy dog across the street is a coward despite his massive size and is always being bullied by stray cats. Yes, I know it all. This is my home. Isn't that obvious? I'm really acting strange. I need to forget this weird anxiety quickly!

"Hey, Tenchi. What time will you be back today?"

"Ah... maybe around 4:00?"

Haruna didn't notice that I had stumbled over my words when she suddenly spoke, and she said coaxingly:

"My part-time job is until 4:00."

"At the art supply store by the station you started at last week? Then I'll come pick you up. There are some tools I want to buy, so let's go home together."

"Really? I'm so happy! Hey, let's stop by that cafe."

"Ah, the one they say is new?"

"Yeah. A girl named Micchan at my job said the Tropical Frappé is really delicious."

"That's fine, but... aren't those kinds of shops full of girls? I'm not very good with that."

"That's not true. There might be a lot of girls, but Micchan said she went there with her boyfriend too."

Haruna pouted like a child, which was so cute I couldn't help but laugh. Even though she usually talks like a grown-up, there's a side to Haruna where she suddenly starts acting like a spoiled child over something trivial. Looking at Haruna like this, the anxiety from earlier really started to seem ridiculous.

"Alright, alright. I'll pick you up at 4:00 then. Thanks for the meal."

"Yay! I'll be waiting at 4:00. Frappé, frappé, tropical~"

Haruna began clearing the dishes while humming. That's right. I've been longing for a scene like this for a long time. A kind girl by my side, acting spoiled or being bossy... a "home" where there's always a good smell coming from the kitchen. I

am truly happy right now. I'm just a student with no income yet, but from now on, I have to work harder and harder to make Haruna happy.

Seeing off by Haruna, I left for school. It’s an art school located two stations away. My major is oil painting. Haruna and I chose our current apartment because it was convenient for commuting to school. It's a run-down apartment, but even though it's small, it's a 2DK, and more than anything, the balcony is wide and has a good view. It faces the two rooms we use as the dining room and bedroom, so on sunny days, I can paint in the fresh air outside. Furthermore, because it's a corner unit, the room I use as another studio also has a window, even though it faces west. Actually, it was a bit over our budget, but Haruna said, "I definitely want this place! I'll work hard at my part-time job too." I think she probably sensed that I really liked that room.

When I entered the classroom, instead of desks, there were rows of easels lined up. Since there was still some time before class started, there were at most only about half the students in the room. The guys who are serious about making a living from painting are drawing until dawn, and the guys who are there for fun are busy hanging out at night. In short, it's a school with many people who are not morning people.

While I was casually flipping through my sketchbook, a voice called out from behind me.

"Yo, did you finish the assignment?"

"Yeah, somehow."

"Must be nice for you. You've got a model available 24 hours a day. You painted your girlfriend again, didn't you?"

"Yeah. I guess so."

"What do you mean, 'I guess so'? I've never seen any figure paintings of yours except of her. Was it Haruna-chan? You're living together, right?"

"Yeah."

"She's a beauty, isn't she? Even if I've only seen her in paintings. I'd like to see the real thing once. Bring her to a drinking party next time."

"Maybe sometime."

"Sometime, sometime..."

Riiiiiiiiiing...

It was the bell for the start of class. Saved. This guy Suzuki isn't a bad guy, but he's typical of those who come to school just for fun. I don't hear very good rumors about him either, and I don't want to introduce him to Haruna.

The class began. The mornings are usually for croquis, and from the afternoon, we paint our own works according to the assignment. In between, about three times a week, there are lectures on art theory or art history. Assignments are given at a fairly fast pace, and if you're serious about it, you won't even have time for a part-time job.

The assignment to be turned in today is a figure painting, and as Suzuki said, my work is of Haruna. I'm painting her with her favorite flowers in the background. Yes, the ones that were on the table this morning. ?... But wasn't that the motif I decided on back in early spring? I don't know much about flowers, but I don't think they're flowers that bloom all year round... Something's bothering me... A feeling of not being quite satisfied...

"Hey, the croquis has started. Aren't you going to draw?"

"Eh? Ah, sorry. I was spacing out."

I really am out of it today. I didn't even notice the croquis had started until Suzuki spoke to me. Looking around, everyone has already made considerable progress with their brushes. This is bad. Croquis are collected and graded every day. I have to work hard...

After that, I was fully occupied with the class. The morning anxiety and the matter of the flowers were completely forgotten while I was immersed in painting. Class ended at 3:30. In preparation for my promise with Haruna, I left school as soon as the lesson was over.

When I went to the art supply store in front of the station, Haruna was still at the register.

"Sorry, Tenchi. I'm done now, so I'll go change."

"Oh, okay. Take your time. There are things I want to buy, too."

Parting with Haruna as she headed to the changing room, I walked through the paint section—which had a massive selection of colors like Cerulean Blue, Vermilion, and Sky Gray—while looking at my notes. At the moment I crouched down in front of a display stand to look for a paint I was missing, I was suddenly struck by a strange sensation. I feel like this has happened before? The moment I thought that, the surrounding scenery warped and distorted from the heat!

"Tenchi! Sorry to keep you waiting."

When I looked up, Haruna was standing there with a smile, having taken off her art store apron and let down her hair, which had been tied back.

What was that just now?

I really am out of it today.

The scenery was back to normal, too.

In the new cafe Micchan recommended, while drinking iced coffee, I told Haruna about that strange sensation I just had. While bringing the Tropical Frappé—refreshing blue shaved ice topped with all sorts of fruit—to her mouth, Haruna rolled her eyes and answered:

"They call that 'déjà vu.' It's happened to me before, too. That feeling of, 'Oh, I've seen this scene before'..."

"It’s not like that, it's more... how should I put it..."

"You shouldn't think too deeply about those things. Even if you think about it, you won't understand what you don't understand. Tenchi, you've seemed like you've had summer fatigue since this morning, so let's stop. That kind of talk."

As she said that, Haruna quickly changed the subject. About who did what at her job, or about a strange customer who came in today...

She’s right. Just like Haruna says. There's no point in thinking about it. In the first place, this kind of feeling might be something everyone experiences. I'm probably just feeling like I'm special.

After going home, taking a bath, and eating dinner, I painted Haruna on the balcony. This time, I’m thinking of painting Haruna against the night sky.

"By the way, Haruna. What was that flower?"

I suddenly remembered and spoke up.

"Flower?"

"Yeah, that bright red one you said you liked..."

"Oh, it's a camellia."

"Camellias are early spring flowers, aren't they?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Wasn't it on the table this morning?"

"Oh, that. The grandmother next door gave it to me. She said it’s rare for them to bloom at this time of year, so they were sent from the countryside. Apparently, it's quite far north..."

"Oh, I see."

"What?"

"No, I thought it was strange, but when I ask, it turns out to be nothing after all..."

"Hehehe..." Haruna laughed.

Reeeeee-ng... Reeeeee-ng...

The wind blew, and the wind chime swayed heavily.

"The wind has picked up. It's unusually chilly tonight, shall we go inside?"

"Yeah. You're going to paint a little more inside, right? I'll make some coffee."

Saying so, Haruna went into the room ahead of me. Looking at the flower on the dining table, she whispered softly.

"They call it... 'blooming out of season' (kuruizaki)."

"Eh?"

"Flowers like this camellia that bloom in the wrong season. 'Blooming out of season'... it has a somewhat mournful ring to it, doesn't it?"

Haruna's profile as she said that looked startlingly lonely.

"Haruna..."

"Hehehe... I guess your sentimental summer fatigue from this morning has rubbed off on me, Tenchi."

To me, who had called her name instinctively, Haruna said with a bright laugh. But Haruna remained somewhat melancholy for the rest of that night.

Even after the lights in the room were turned off at night, she seemed forlorn, and she snuggled up to me in the futon and whispered.

"It feels like a dream."

"A dream? What does?"

"Everything. Everything about us being like this right now... feels like a dream..."

Haruna's body as she snuggled against me was thin, and although it was a rare cool night, she was far too cold. A vague feeling of unease washed over my chest as well. Holding Haruna close, I said as if to convince myself:

"What are you talking about? I'm right here. It’s okay."

"That's right. You're here, aren't you, Tenchi?"

"Yeah."

"You're warm, aren't you... Hey, Tenchi?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you love me?"

"I love you."

"Will you stay with me forever?"

"I will."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Absolutely?"

"Absolutely! If you keep saying that, won't it be you who runs away, Haruna?"

"No way!"

Haruna declared with surprising strength.

"What's wrong? Why are you shouting?"

"It's you, Tenchi! Why do you say such a thing? I'll stay by your side forever! I'll be here forever and ever!"

Like a spoiled child, Haruna kept talking while pushing her hands against my chest as I held her, shaking her head.

"Come on, it was just a joke. Don't be silly."

"A joke?"

"Of course. Let's be together forever, the two of us."

"Yeah. Forever."

Saying that, Haruna clung to me tightly.

Reeeeee-ng... Reeeeee-ng...

The faint sound of the wind chime sounded like Haruna's sobbing. I buried my face in Haruna's soft hair and kept stroking her head as if to soothe a young child. While doing so for a while, Haruna finally seemed to feel at ease and began to breathe rhythmically in sleep.

Reeeeee-ng... Reeeeee-ng...

The wind chime is ringing again. It's a lonely sound. Is it because of that? Both Haruna and I have become sensitive. Maybe I'll take it down tomorrow...

Chapter 2:

17 Years Old • The Summer of Absence

It is summer. Pure, unadulterated summer. The blazing sun beats down, relentlessly searing the skin.

This is the downtown district of Tokyo.

In this alleyway lined with *nagaya* row houses—structures that reportedly survived both the Great Kanto Earthquake and the fires of war—morning glories wilt despondently under the eaves. Rare for this cynical end of the century, no one seems to lock their front doors during the broad daylight; bamboo blinds hang over open entryways, and the sound of television sets leaks out from within.

Leaving the alley and looking toward the main street, one finds several merchant houses huddled together, their signboards having weathered the wind and rain for years—another sight rare in the modern age.

Inside one of these shops, a traditional sweets parlor with a large cloth dyed with the character for "Ice" hanging out front, two women were eating shaved ice.

One was a black-haired beauty dressed in a kimono, fitting perfectly into this old-town atmosphere. However, her true identity was not that of an Earthling. She was Ayeka, the First Princess of Jurai, the leading power of the galaxy. Incidentally, she wasn't wearing traditional Japanese clothing as a "disguise" for her visit to Earth, a remote frontier; rather, in her home world of Jurai, everything from clothing to spaceships happened to share a Japanese aesthetic by pure coincidence.

The other woman was a beauty with a spectacular physique and light-blue hair standing up in punk-like spikes. Her true identity was Ryoko, a space pirate whose name was feared throughout the galaxy.

For some reason, these two were eating shaved ice in downtown Tokyo. Ryoko was eating *Uji-kintoki* (green tea with adzuki beans), and Ayeka was eating strawberry milk. The fact that the galaxy's greatest pirate and the First Princess

of the Royal House of Jurai were eating shaved ice side-by-side was strange enough, but there was something even more peculiar happening.

It was quiet.

As those in the know are well aware, these two are on notoriously bad terms.

Whenever they are together, a massive battle usually ensues. Yet, for some reason, they were sitting side-by-side "quietly" eating their ice.

When Ryoko let out a heavy sigh, "Whew..."

Ayeka would follow with a "Haaa..." That was the vibe.

Normally, it would go like this:

"Hey, how can you eat something as pretentious as strawberry milk? You're too old for that, and you should be ashamed," Ryoko would say.

"Excuse me?! Well, I suppose a plain *Uji-kintoki* suits someone as dull as you, but for a woman like me, who remains radiant no matter what she does, nothing less than a flashy color will do!" Ayeka would snap back.

Ryoko would immediately counter:

"Tch. No matter how much you try to cover up your shortcomings with bright colors, it ain't gonna work. As people get older, they start developing a tacky taste for the gaudy."

Then Ayeka would finally explode: "You! I was trying to be polite, and you have the nerve to get cocky...!!"

Ultimately, it should have devolved into a cacophony of *Gyaaa! Boka! Suka! Boka-suka! Do-chuun!*—but not today. Today, the two of them simply brought the ice to their mouths with solemnity, occasionally letting out sorrowful sighs.

There was no argument like:

"Haaa, I'm stuffed. Thanks for the treat. Since you're so much older, I'll let you pay the bill as a sign of respect, Ayeka."

"What?! Wait right there! You dine-and-dash space pirate!!"

Again, nothing like that. They simply paid the shopkeeper for their respective portions and began to trudge away.

There was no punchline like:

"Oi, oi, you're being awfully quiet. Is it that? Do old people's teeth ache when they eat cold things?"

"Be silent! You were the one sleeping with your stomach exposed yesterday; perhaps your bowels are out of order? Or did you go and eat something off the street again?"

...None of that. Wow, I'm sorry. I won't do it again.

Anyway, the two of them are walking quietly.

"Whew..."

"Haaa..."

As before, nothing but sighs. Their steps were weak, and both looked like they had lost a bit of weight.

"Ayeka, it’s already summer," Ryoko said, looking up at the spitefully blue sky.

"It is summer, isn't it? Whew." Ayeka also let out a large sigh and looked up. In the infinite blue, a faint, vanishing vapor trail lingered. There wasn't a single grand cumulonimbus cloud; even the sky seemed subdued.

"It’s been... almost half a year."

"Yes. Half a year."

"It feels like a thousand years."

"It does feel like a thousand years, doesn't it?"

"Damn it." Ryoko kicked a pebble in the road as if out of frustration.

"Say, Ryoko-san?"

"What?"

"I think I shall go and offer a prayer after all."

"Didn't you say you weren't going because there's never any divine favor?"

"Yes. But just in case..."

"Just in case?"

"Perhaps the gods will feel inclined to listen to a wish today."

They were discussing whether or not to go to a small temple located in the backstreets of this old district. Normally, this would spark a fight about how it's a temple so there are no "gods," or how gods don't act based on "whims," but today was different.

"I guess so. Let's give it a try," Ryoko agreed.

They entered the alley, passed through the gate of the small temple, and began climbing the stairs toward a soot-covered, ancient Buddhist statue. It was then—

"Ah!" Ayeka suddenly screamed as she spun around, nearly falling over.

"What? What is it?" Ryoko asked, catching Ayeka. But as Ryoko turned to look, she froze as if dazed.

"Tenchi?"

"Tenchi-sama?"

They both whispered at the same time. At the end of their gaze, on the stairs right next to them, was the figure of a boy—no, a young man—walking down the steps.

However, the figure gradually lost its outline and vanished like a mirage...

"Tenchi!?"

"Tenchi-sama!?"

Meen, min, min, min, min...

Zee—, zee, zee, zee, zee...

Meen, min, min, min, min...

Zee—, zee, zee, zee, zee...

The cicadas were crying.

To the two of them, the entire landscape looked as if it had frozen solid.

"Hey, you're in the way!" Some children who had been playing hopscotch on the stairs complained to the two standing still, but the words didn't seem to reach their ears.

Finally, Ryoko spoke.

"Hey, did you see that?"

"Yes. I saw it."

"That was definitely Tenchi, wasn't it?"

"Yes. He seemed a bit more adult, but there is no mistake that it was Tenchi-sama."

The young man walking down the stairs was indeed Masaki Tenchi, the one they had been searching for so desperately. However, he appeared considerably more mature than the Tenchi they knew.

"Then... how did it look to you?"

Ryoko asked as if she couldn't believe her own eyes. Ayeka also faltered.

"What do you mean 'how'..."

Ryoko whispered softly, as if praying it were a mistake.

"To me, it looked like Tenchi vanished right before my eyes."

But Ayeka’s reply bluntly betrayed Ryoko’s hope.

"It looked the same to me."

"What does this mean? Did we both have the same dream?"

"Surely not..."

"Then what the hell is it?! Explain it to me!"

"How should I know!"

"....."

"....."

They fell silent.

The cheers of the children echoed through the temple grounds.

Cars on the main street honked their horns loudly.

The savory smell of grilled fish drifted from somewhere.

In this world that was so overwhelmingly real, they felt as though they alone were being shown a bad dream—as if they had been left behind.

This was the reason the two were so quiet.

It had been half a year since Tenchi, the object of their affection, had disappeared.

There were absolutely no clues.

The Tenchi they had finally laid eyes on after their long search had just vanished like a mirage right in front of them.

On Ryoko's arm, the needle of her wristwatch-style "Tenchi Tracker" swung violently, then pointed back to zero.

< Old Tale ① >

Floating in the darkness of space was a single ship. It seemed to have been on a long, long journey. Now, finally, it appeared to be reaching the beautiful blue planet before it: Earth.

However, just a short distance from Earth, the ship remained in that darkness for many days. It was as if it were hesitating to descend... Having finished a long, grueling journey, why would it stop now, when it could finally land on the warm soil? The ship remained anchored as if it had lost its destination.

How many nights passed? Finally, the ship began to move. Like an old man finally hauling up his heavy frame...

The ship entered the atmosphere, emerging from the darkness into a light-filled blue sky. But the ship did not look even slightly happy.

Eventually, it landed in a secluded mountain area, and a man stepped out. Fitting for the heavy movement of the ship, the man's face was dark.

The man lived in those mountains for a while. Surrounded by trees and listening to the babbling of the brook, his heart seemed to gradually soften.

But something else began to govern the man in place of the darkness. It was "sorrow."

Eventually, as if trying to sever that sorrow, the man went down into the city.

He left behind only a single tree, like a signpost of the path where he had descended...

This is a story from long, long ago.

Chapter 3:

19 Years Old • An Uneasy Dream

Who is he? That boy...

In the middle of the dancing snow, he is trying to catch the flakes that fall and melt into his small palms. He is smiling. He is having fun.

But in the next instant, the boy's face suddenly contorts, and he begins to cry as if he can no longer bear it.

No matter how much he cries, the tears do not dry. The boy's crying voice echoes through the snow.

Ah, that's me.

That was the day my mother died.

The most unbearable, the most sorrowful day...

What happened after that?

Did someone come to get me?

Did someone comfort me?

How did I manage to get past that grief?

Since then...

Spring comes, summer comes, autumn comes, winter comes...

Spring comes, summer comes, autumn comes, winter comes...

Spring comes, summer comes, autumn comes, winter comes...

Spring comes, summer comes, autumn comes, winter comes...

Spring comes, summer comes, autumn comes, winter comes...

The shrine grounds? Ah, it's my home.

It's quite lively.

That's right. I feel like I was living with a lot of people.

It's me! I'm laughing.

I look happy.

Is it dinner time? It smells good.

Hahaha... How stupid, fighting over the side dishes.

Both Ryoko and Ayeka-san are such children.

Ryoko...? Ayeka...?

Who were they?

It's spring. Cherry blossoms are dancing...

So beautiful.

Is someone sweeping the garden?

"Wow! A carpet of cherry blossom petals!"

Sasami-chan.

"Myaon!"

Is Ryo-Ohki helping too?

Wait, it's getting noisy over there.

"This is *my* broom!"

"What, does it have your name written on it somewhere?"

These two again.

"Hey, give it a rest."

"What! Tenchi, are you saying I'm the one who's wrong?"

"No, it's not like that..."

"Then Tenchi-sama, are you saying that I am at fault?"

"I told you, that's not what I mean."

"Tenchi, who's more important to you? Me or this woman!"

"Tenchi-sama, please state it clearly!"

"Who... I mean..."

"Which one is it!"

"Which of us is it?"

Stop it, cut it out. Which one... why does it always turn into this!

Choosing one or the other—that's impossible.

It's fun when everyone is together...

"FUN? REALLY?"

It is! Of course it is.

"EVERYONE IS HAVING FUN?"

That's right. Grandfather is there, Dad is there, Ryoko is there, Ayeka-san is there, Sasami-chan is there, Ryo-Ohki is there...!

"AREN'T YOU JUST LONELY?"

.....!!

"BECAUSE YOU'RE LONELY, DON'T YOU JUST WANT SOMEONE TO BE WITH YOU?"

That’s not it!

"BUT IT’S STRANGE. NOT KNOWING WHO YOU NEED."

Who... I need.

"COULD IT BE THAT WHAT YOU TRULY WANT IS SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY?"

Something else? Who are you!?

"COME, THIS WAY..."

The scent of camellias?

"I WILL GIVE YOU WHAT YOU WANT.

COME, THIS WAY...

COME, THIS WAY...

COME, THIS WAY..."

"Tenchi, choose me!"

"Tenchi-sama, choose me...!"

Stop it, stop it, cut it out!

I’m begging you...!

Reeeeee-ng...

Reeeeee-ng...

What is that sound? Such a lonely sound.

Nostalgic, yet sorrowful...

What was it? Yes, a wind chime.

A wind chime? In this season...?

Thump, thump, thump, thump...

Thump, thump, thump, thump...

The sound of a kitchen knife.

"Tenchi! If you don't get up soon, you'll be late!"

The door opened, and a girl peeked her head in.

"Haruna...?"

"How can you sleep so long when it's this hot? Look, it's another beautiful day!"

??????????????

"What's wrong? Tenchi."

"No..."

"Summer fatigue? You look pale."

"Didn't you say the same thing yesterday?"

"Eh?"

"No, never mind. Just... a dream..."

"A dream?"

"I was having a dream. About something... important..."

"Something important?"

Haruna's eyes peered into mine, searching, almost accusing.

"No, it's nothing big. I just felt like it was a somewhat nostalgic dream..."

"A nostalgic dream?"

"Yeah."

"Wasn't I in it?"

"It was a dream of the past."

"I hate dreams like that!"

"Haruna. It’s just a dream."

"Dream or whatever, I hate it!"

"Haruna, you're such a jealous one. Alright, alright, I won't have it anymore. More importantly, is breakfast ready?"

"Really? You won't dream it again?"

Haruna peered at me suspiciously.

"Yeah, I won't."

Since it’s a dream, it’s not a promise I could possibly keep, but that’s the cute part of Haruna.

"I mean it. Breakfast is almost ready, so go wash your face."

Retracting her sharp tone from earlier, Haruna vanished into the kitchen with a laugh. A classic case of "the crow that cried has already laughed."

Meen, min, min, min, min...

Zee—, zee, zee, zee, zee...

Meen, min, min, min, min...

Zee—, zee, zee, zee, zee...

The cicadas are noisy again today.

Even so...

I feel like I’m forgetting something important.

Meen, min, min, min, min...

Zee—, zee, zee, zee, zee...

Meen, min, min, min, min...

Zee—, zee, zee, zee, zee...

Ugh, so noisy.

I can’t gather my thoughts.

Reeeeee-ng...

Reeeeee-ng...

The wind chime is ringing, even though there doesn't seem to be any breeze.

Suddenly, anxiety rushed over me, and I instinctively looked at my hands.

I gripped my left hand tightly with my right.

It’s a strange thing—feeling most at ease through the touch of my own hands.

"Tenchi? Breakfast is ready!"

I ate breakfast and left for the art school two stations away. Haruna said she had a part-time job at the art supply store in front of the station. She suggested meeting up on the way back to go to a new shop with delicious ice cream, and I said I’d pick her up at 4:00.

School finishes at 3:30. When I arrived at the art store at 4:00, Haruna was still at the checkout counter. She told me to wait while she changed, so I walked through the paint section to pick up some supplies I was running low on.

We ate ice cream on the way home, I took a bath, finished dinner, and painted Haruna on the balcony. Around 1:00 AM, I got into my futon and turned off the lights.

Reeeeee-ng...

Reeeeee-ng...

The wind chime makes a sorrowful sound. Even though it's summer, it's a mournful sound, like a wind chime that someone forgot to put away.

Maybe it's because of this wind chime that I feel so strange. I'll take it down tomorrow...

Reeeeee-ng...

Reeeeee-ng...

What is that sound? Such a lonely sound.

Nostalgic, yet sorrowful...

Right, the sound of a wind chime.

A wind chime? In this season?

Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump...

Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump...

Who's using a kitchen knife?

Who?

"Tenchi! If you don't get up soon, you'll be late!"

Who? It's obvious. It's Haruna.

Who else would it be?

"Hey, I went with a completely Japanese style for breakfast today."

"Can you come pick me up at my job?"

"A shop with delicious parfaits opened."

"We'll meet at 4:00."

Meen, min, min, min, min...

Zee—, zee, zee, zee, zee...

Meen, min, min, min, min...

Zee—, zee, zee, zee, zee...

The cicadas are noisy.

Reeeeee-ng...

Reeeeee-ng...

I have to put the wind chime away.

Reeeeee-ng...

Reeeeee-ng...

What is that sound? Such a lonely sound.

Nostalgic, yet sorrowful...

Right, the sound of a wind chime.

A wind chime? In this season?

Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump...

Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump...

The sound of a knife. Someone is chopping something.

Who? What?

"Hey Tenchi, wake up. You'll be late."

Late? For where?

The art school two stations away.

School finishes at 3:30.

"Let’s go to the shop with delicious anmitsu?"

Sure. Haruna, I'll come get you.

At 4:00...

When I get home, I take a bath, eat dinner, and paint Haruna.

My figure paintings are always of Haruna.

Haruna with flowers in the background.

Haruna with the night sky in the background.

Haruna sitting in a chair.

Haruna standing in a park.

Haruna laughing.

Haruna crying.

Cute Haruna.

Beautiful Haruna.

Haruna, Haruna, Haruna, Haruna...

"Haruna! What is the meaning of this?"

My sketchbook has been ripped to shreds and thrown in the trash.

"Because... it's your fault, Tenchi!"

"My fault? Did I do something to upset you? Even so, you didn't have to tear up my sketchbook!"

"Because..."

"I thought you understood my dreams better than anyone, Haruna."

"I do understand! I understand you better than anyone!"

"Then why..."

"Who is she?"

"Eh?"

"The person in that sketchbook—who is she?"

"...Is that why you tore it?"

"....."

What was drawn in the new sketchbook was a portrait of a woman, but it wasn't Haruna.

That’s why Haruna was angry.

I spoke as gently as I could.

"Haruna, it’s a misunderstanding. This girl is, how should I say, an image in my head. At night, when I was at my sketchbook, she just popped into my mind, and once I started drawing, the image just kept flowing... There’s nothing for you to misunderstand. It’s my fault for not saying anything to you, but please don't tear my sketchbook without asking. This time, let's just say we both..."

"NO!"

Haruna screamed, cutting me off.

"I hate it. Image or whatever, I absolutely hate the idea of you drawing another girl!"

"That’s... don't be unreasonable."

I flinched at the intensity of Haruna’s rejection.

"I’m not being unreasonable! Because up until now, you only ever drew me. That’s how we’ve been doing things! You’re the one who’s being strange, Tenchi. I guess you don't care if I’m gone anymore? You want to be with that person, don’t you?"

"I told you, it’s an image. I can’t be with a woman who doesn't exist."

"Then, what if she *did* exist?"

The way Haruna spoke was challenging, almost menacing. I wanted to say flatly that such a person couldn't possibly exist, but my response came out weak.

"I wouldn't know... unless I met her."

"Ugh..."

Haruna suddenly burst into tears. It was like her aggressive shouting from moments ago was a lie... How do girls' emotions change so quickly? No, men’s

emotions change just as much, but being able to vent them so easily is a girl's privilege, isn't it?

"Ugh, ugh, *hic*, *hic*."

Between sobs, she squeezed out half-formed words like "Because you..." and "I'm just..." through her throat. Looking at Haruna, her shoulders shaking, an indescribable feeling of endearment welled up in me. No matter how I thought about it, what Haruna was saying was incoherent, but fine, let's leave it at that for today. I'll make her understand over time. Until then, I can just draw that image of a girl at school...

I put my arm around Haruna's shoulder and whispered in her ear.

"Haruna, I was wrong. It's okay now."

Between sobs, Haruna answered.

"Really? You won't draw her anymore?"

"Yeah, I won't. So don't cry so much. Your eyes will get puffy."

"Okay."

She was still sniffing and hiccuping, but her emotions seemed to have settled considerably. She looked up at me with a slightly bashful, upward glance.

"It's a promise, Tenchi."

She held out her right pinky finger.

I felt a bit guilty, since I had been planning to draw that girl at school, but I couldn't refuse her here. I quietly held out my right pinky and hooked it with Haruna's.

"Pinky swear, whoever tells a lie has to swallow a thousand needles."

I felt as though the girl drawn in the shredded sketchbook in the trash can was looking at me sadly.

Even if it was just an image, it was a shame.

She couldn't exactly be called feminine, but she was a beauty who looked like someone you could talk to...

Reeeeee-ng...

Reeeeee-ng...

That wind chime again... It’s a disagreeable sound.

But I don't think I can take it down tonight.

It’s a wind chime we bought together.

Haruna would definitely hate it.

I don't want to do anything Haruna would hate.

I must not do it...

< Old Tale ② >

It was winter. A man was visiting a mountain said to be the highest on this island.

The harsh winter mountain felt perfectly in tune with the man's sorrowful feelings; if anything, he felt comforted by it.

As the man walked the mountain path through the drifting snow, he heard the voice of a young boy chanting sutras from out of nowhere. The owner of the voice was a boy living in a humble shack.

The boy said he had risen in arms with his father and elder brother, but they were defeated, and both his father and brother were killed. Only the boy, who was 13 at the time, and his younger half-brothers were shown mercy and spared...

Pitying the boy who read sutras in memory of his dead father and brother, the man often visited the boy's shack.

The boy, who grew older in misfortune, eventually became a young man. When he declared he wanted to avenge his father, the man gladly imparted his wisdom. Borrowing the wisdom of the man who had traveled long through space, the young man who was once a boy expanded his influence rapidly.

Before he knew it, the youth had surpassed the man in age, yet the youth still relied on this mysterious man who helped him at every turn.

Eventually, the youth unified the land.

But because of his long years of hardship, he could trust no one. He grew cold toward his younger half-brother who had sought revenge with him, and even killed the innocent young children of his enemies. He believed that one day, they would come for revenge just as he had...

The man ceased to appear entirely.

He planted a single tree by the shack where the boy once chanted sutras...

The clan of the former boy who took over the land perished in three generations...

This is a story from the twelfth century, a time when Japan was divided into many provinces.

Chapter 4:

Seventeen Years Old • Blank Footprints

♪ Chaka, chanrin, chanrin, denden.

Well now, well now! Ladies and gentlemen, after dragging things out for so long, the time has finally come for me to tell you what has happened up to this point.

The season was early spring.

The place was Okayama.

Masaki Shrine, in a tiny village, was wrapped in cherry blossoms blooming so fully and so early that they looked almost like mist or clouds.

Living at Masaki Shrine were the head priest Katsuhito Masaki, his son-in-law Nobuyuki, Nobuyuki's son Tenchi, and, due to certain circumstances, two beautiful women and one beautiful young girl who had come from outer space, along with one pet.

It was a windy day.

Cherry blossom petals danced through the air.

Sasami—the model for beautiful young girls across the nation, adorable and perfect at housework—was sweeping the yard. Though she might not look it, she was the second princess of the Juraian royal family. She was Ayeka's younger sister, and also a shrine maiden.

Beside Sasami stood Ryo-Ohki, the model pet of all pets nationwide. This rabbit-like, cat-like creature with long ears might not look it either, but when transformed, she became an actual spaceship.

Directing the cleaning effort was the head priest of Masaki Shrine, Katsuhito Masaki. These days he was affectionately known on Earth as "Gramps," but in truth, long ago he had once been a prince of the Juraian royal family.

"Amazing! It's like a carpet of cherry blossoms. It almost feels too wasteful to sweep them away," Sasami said admiringly as she diligently swept fallen petals with her bamboo broom, sounding every bit the sensitive young girl she was.

“Meowoon,” replied the well-behaved Ryo-Ohki in agreement.

“Along the riverbank, row upon row of camellias… no matter how long I gaze upon them, I never tire of the spring fields of Kose,” recited Katsuhito, like the elder he was, quoting a poem from the *Manyoshu*.

Though for some reason it wasn’t a poem about cherry blossoms. Perhaps he didn’t know any.

In any case, it was a peaceful and picturesque scene. The cherry blossoms were beautiful, Sasami was adorable, Ryo-Ohki was well-behaved, and Katsuhito added just the right flavor to the moment. Nothing could have been better.

Except, as expected, *that* shrill voice suddenly rang out.

“Just give it here already!”

It was Ryoko—the model space pirate for the entire universe, beautiful, violent, and utterly outrageous.

“And this is mine!!”

The voice answering her belonged to Ayeka, first princess of the Juraian royal family—hardly a model princess for the universe, perhaps, but surely an object of admiration for girls everywhere.

And what these two women were dramatically fighting over was none other than Masaki Shrine’s bamboo broom. It was an undeniably childish sight, but let us observe a little longer.

“I’m saying I’ll do the cleaning, so hand it over nicely!”

“No! I found it first. It’s *my* broom.”

“Oh yeah? Does it have your name written on it somewhere?”

“It doesn’t need to! I’m holding it, therefore it’s mine! Besides, what could a space pirate possibly know about cleaning?”

“And what about you? You’re just some sheltered princess who’s probably never even touched a broom! All you’ve done is grow older for no reason at all—OW! What the hell was that?!”

The broom had slammed directly into Ryoko’s face.

“I did nothing. You tried to snatch it by force, and—ahh!”

Apparently Ryoko's foot was now planted on Ayeka's foot with her full weight.

"Oops, sorry. Lost my balance there—Guh!"

This time the broom handle drove into Ryoko's side.

"Oh dear, I seem to have stumbled. My apologies—GYAAAH!"

And just as Ryoko finally kicked Ayeka for real, the hero of this story, Tenchi Masaki, could stand it no longer and shouted:

"Cut it out, Ryoko!"

(For those unfamiliar, let me explain now: Tenchi is, technically speaking, the protagonist of this series.)

Unfortunately, that may not have been the best way to intervene.

"Tenchi, are you saying *I'm* the one at fault?"

Ryoko immediately closed in on him. Put that way, both she and Ayeka were equally to blame, and Tenchi stumbled over his words.

"No, that's not what I mean..."

But that only made things worse.

"Then, Lord Tenchi, are you saying *I'm* at fault?"

Ayeka cornered him with desperate intensity. Once again, Tenchi was in trouble.

"That's not it either..."

Ah, listening to him was frustrating. Such indecisiveness! He was practically inviting the two women to take advantage of him. A man must never show weakness to women. The conversation could veer in a terrible direction.

"So which is it?!"

"Which one is it?!"

See? All he had done was try to stop their fight, and now somehow it had become a matter of choosing between them. At this point, steering the conversation back to the main plot would be harder than writing a *Tenchi Muyo!* novel without inserting any jokes.

“Which one…” Tenchi stammered, while the conversation leapt even further ahead.

“That’s right! This is the perfect opportunity. Let’s settle it right here!” Ayeka declared something outrageous.

“Settle what…” asked Tenchi, looking as clueless as the poster child for dense men everywhere. Seriously, was this okay for the protagonist?

“Isn’t it obvious? You will clearly decide here and now whether you choose me or Ryoko!”

Tenchi tried to say something, but Ryoko’s loud cheering drowned him out.

“Now *that’s* interesting! Go on, Tenchi! Tell this stuck-up princess she’s nothing but a nuisance!”

“What did you say?! Lord Tenchi, please tell this space pirate clearly to ‘Go back to outer space!’”

“Well…”

Tenchi knew he had to say *something*, but with two overwhelmingly forceful beauties pressing him, no words would come out. Meanwhile they continued advancing toward him.

“Tenchi!”

“Lord Tenchi!”

“Which one?!”

“Which is it?!”

And then the words Tenchi finally uttered were—

“Ah!! A bear that just woke from hibernation is airing out its futon!”

…Yes. That.

The statement was so absurdly sudden that even Ryoko and Ayeka were stunned speechless for a moment. And while they stood there dumbfounded, Tenchi dashed away at full speed.

Though honestly, there wasn’t much of an escape route. At best, he could flee into the mountain behind the shrine. Even I, the narrator of this story (← who *am* I, anyway?), couldn’t help feeling pathetic. What exactly was this guy thinking?

Which, incidentally, is pretty much the central concept of this story. But putting that aside, let's continue.

Fleeing from a situation most people would beg to experience—being pursued romantically by two beautiful women—our hopelessly awkward Tenchi was now out of breath on the mountain behind the shrine.

Brilliant camellias bloomed all around him.

"If I came this far, I should be safe. Whew..."

Tenchi sighed deeply. Below him he could see Masaki Shrine, where he had just been.

"Choosing between them... I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because... I like them both. I like this life."

"That's strange."

"Strange?"

"If you can't choose, then the girls will be unhappy."

"Who are you?"

Tenchi had thought he was merely talking to himself while gazing down at the shrine. But suddenly, he sensed someone speaking directly inside his head.

"Mom...?"

Without thinking, Tenchi called out to his dead mother.

"Mom had it easy. She got together with her first love, Dad, just like that... Was it destiny, I wonder..."

Having lost his mother at a young age, Tenchi had a tendency to idealize both her and the love between his parents. He muttered the words wistfully.

At that moment, a strong wind blew, shaking the camellia tree violently.

"The person... of destiny..."

Or perhaps he only imagined hearing those words carried on the wind.

“Tenchiiii!!”

Ryoko, who had chased Tenchi up the mountain, arrived beneath the camellia tree only to find he was no longer there.

“That’s weird. I swear he was just here... Tenchi! Come out already!”

And that was how it all began.

On one early spring day, Tenchi—the man loved by Ryoko and Ayeka—vanished.

Chon!

☆☆☆☆☆

“Honestly, Ayeka, this is all your fault! You’re the one who said, ‘Lord Tenchi, please choose between us!’ Tenchi’s too nice, so he ran away because he couldn’t bear making you cry!”

“My, my. Please limit the jokes to your ridiculous face. Why would *I* cry? Lord Tenchi merely realized that if *you* started screaming and becoming violent, everyone else would suffer.”

“Hah! Women get delusional once they’re old enough. What makes you think Tenchi would ever choose you?”

“And *you*, of all people, should learn your place. Why would Lord Tenchi choose a wanted criminal like you?”

“Anyway, the reason Tenchi won’t come home is because *you’re* here! I don’t know if it’s Jurai or Hebrai or whatever, but hurry up and go home already!”

“No. The reason Lord Tenchi has not returned is because someone as vulgar as you is in this house. Why don’t you hurry off to commit piracy or robbery somewhere?”

“What did you say?!”

“How dare you?!”

Ryoko and Ayeka continued arguing endlessly. Two full days had passed since Tenchi disappeared.

"Will you two *stop it already?!*"

At last Sasami shouted.

"We searched the mountain and all of Tenchi's friends' houses, but we still can't find him! Aren't you both worried about him?"

"Sasami..."

Even Ayeka looked crestfallen after being scolded by her younger sister.

"Of course we're worried. That's why I'm trying to get the root of all evil, Miss Ryoko, to leave—"

"What?! You're the one who needs to leave so Tenchi can come home!"

Still trying to continue their argument, the two women finally drove Sasami to blurt out words she had desperately tried not to say.

"Because you two are like this, Tenchi won't come back! I hate you both!!"

Tears filled her large eyes as she shouted the words all at once before running outside crying.

"Sasami!"

"Hey, wait!"

The two called after her simultaneously, but Sasami never looked back.

"Meow, meow, meow!"

Ryo-Ohki cried too, as if scolding the pair, before chasing after Sasami.

Left behind in the tatami room, the two women finally seemed too exhausted even to continue fighting. Both lowered their heads in silence.

"...Ugh..."

Eventually Ayeka began crying quietly.

Ryoko reached toward Ayeka's trembling shoulders as though wanting to say something, but in the end she merely left the room.

Ayeka's sobbing echoed through the quiet house, sounding almost as though the house itself were crying.

Outside, Sasami sat weeping beside the lake.

Tenchi's disappearance... Ryoko and Ayeka's worsening fights since he vanished... the cruel things she herself had said... all these thoughts pressed painfully against her small chest.

Beside her, Ryo-Ohki crouched anxiously, frustrated by her inability to offer comforting words.

It was then, as Ryoko approached from behind after spotting Sasami, that Katsuhito appeared seemingly from nowhere and sat beside the girl.

"Uncle?"

Sasami looked up at him with swollen, tearful eyes, and Katsuhito spoke gently.

"Sorry for making even you worry, Sasami-chan."

"....."

Still silent, Sasami stared ahead while Katsuhito continued, looking out over the lake.

"Have you truly come to hate your sisters?"

"....."

Still silent, Sasami shook her head firmly.

"I see. That's a relief. If Tenchi heard that Sasami-chan hated Miss Ayeka and Miss Ryoko because of him, he'd be terribly sad."

"But... I don't understand. Tenchi's gone, but they still keep fighting like always. Aren't they worried?"

Katsuhito answered firmly, reassuring the girl with eyes full of anxiety and confusion.

"Don't worry. Tenchi will be fine."

"But..."

"He's my grandson, after all."

Katsuhito grinned and gave a wink entirely unsuited to him, making Sasami smile despite herself.

“There, finally a smile. Smiles suit you, Sasami-chan.”

Sasami lowered her eyes shyly at his words, and Katsuhito continued.

“And about Miss Ayeka and the others—you mustn’t blame them too much.”

“But…”

“They’re frightened.”

“……”

“If they don’t keep fighting like that, their thoughts will drift toward the worst possibilities. They’re desperately trying to distract themselves. That’s how it looks to me.”

“Uncle…”

“Come on, let’s go home. You should apologize to your sisters.”

“…Okay.”

Encouraged by Katsuhito, Sasami stood up.

Watching the two walk back toward the shrine, Ryoko kicked a small stone into the lake with a muttered:

“Hmph.”

Despite the forceful gesture, the pebble left the ground weakly and sank into the water with a lonely *plop*.

“Tenchi… where the hell did you go?”

She murmured the words to no one in particular.

Katsuhito hadn’t needed to tell her. Ryoko already knew she was afraid.

Not even when attacking massive ships… not even when fighting alone through the darkness of space… had she ever felt this terrified before.

The greenery of the mountain deepened day by day.

The cherry blossoms scattered. Even the camellias lost their flowers.

But Tenchi did not return.

A full month had already passed since his disappearance.

Ryoko and Ayeka's defiant arguments had finally ceased. Now each day simply ended with them praying that tomorrow Tenchi would come home before falling asleep.

And yet daily life continued.

Nobuyuki still went to work every day. Katsuhito continued tending the shrine. Sasami continued cooking meals.

Even without Tenchi, everyday life stretched on endlessly.

That itself became a kind of terror.

The people of the Masaki household were seized by the fear that time might continue passing as though nothing had happened.

The fear was so awful they could not even say it aloud.

Unable to bear that anxiety any longer, it was Sasami who finally spoke.

"Sasami is going back to Jurai."

"Huh?"

The most shocked person was Ayeka.

Her younger sister, who worried for Tenchi every bit as much as she did, wanted to return home to Jurai now, before anything had been resolved?

"Because staying here like this won't accomplish anything. Sasami will return to Jurai and use the royal family's resources to search for clues."

Ayeka was deeply moved by her little sister's brave determination.

And she realized she herself could not continue doing nothing.

"Sasami, I shall go with you."

Leaving Earth now pained her deeply, but she could not leave everything to her younger sister alone.

“No, I’ll be fine by myself. Big Sister, you stay on Earth. If I find anything, I’ll contact you immediately. That’s more efficient, right?”

Ayeka gazed proudly at her younger sister’s resolute profile.

(That’s right… this child is not only my little sister. She is also Jurai’s shrine maiden.)

“Very well, Sasami. I’m counting on you. But be careful on your journey.”

No matter how advanced space travel became, journeys through space were still dangerous. Ayeka looked worriedly at her younger sister.

“Yes, Big Sister.”

Sasami answered seriously.

Leaving behind the fresh green mountains of early summer, Sasami departed aboard Ryo-Ohki.

At Ryoko’s suggestion, Ryo-Ohki would accompany Sasami for the journey.

Watching the ship disappear into the brilliantly clear blue sky, Ryoko said to Ayeka:

“Guess it’s about time we got moving too.”

“Huh? Moving? Where to?”

“Isn’t it obvious? We’re going to find Tenchi.”

“We… are going to search for Lord Tenchi…”

“Yeah. Waiting around isn’t my style. Or are you planning to stay here?”

Ayeka hesitated for only a moment before answering firmly.

“No. I’m coming.”

That very day, the two women left the house.

They had no leads, but they could no longer endure sitting still and waiting.

First, they decided to search Okayama City again from the beginning.

And so, united by the single goal of finding Tenchi, the two romantic rivals set out on a journey without destination.

☆☆☆☆☆

Meanwhile, Washu had also been tracking Tenchi ever since his disappearance.

Washu was a self-proclaimed genius scientist—and, according to everyone else, a mad scientist with a decidedly abnormal sensibility.

Inside the private laboratory she had constructed illegally within subspace, Washu summoned Galaxy Police first-class detectives Mihoshi and Kiyone and proposed a certain plan.

(There really are an awful lot of alien women worried about Tenchi. Lucky bastard!)

"No way! Absolutely not!"

The upright and proper first-class detective Kiyone flatly refused.

Meanwhile beside her stood Mihoshi—whose promotion to first-class detective, not to mention friendship with Kiyone, remained a complete mystery. As usual, Mihoshi looked absentminded.

Washu addressed her gently.

"And what do you think, Lady Mihoshi?"

"Ehhh? Me? But if Kiyone says she won't do it, then I..."

"You don't mind if Lord Tenchi is never found?"

Washu immediately pressed her with sharp intensity, causing Mihoshi to stammer.

"I-I *do* mind, but... Kiyoneeee..."

"No. Absolutely not this time. Sneaking into the Science Academy computer room? Do you realize what would happen if we got caught?"

Kiyone's resolve was firm.

Naturally so. Why should a first-class Galaxy Police detective have to play thief?

And the target was the Science Academy. Beyond security so airtight that even Galaxy Police credentials were useless without an ID card lay countless top-secret classified materials.

If they were discovered sneaking into a place like that, their lives—not merely their jobs—would be in danger.

“Washu, do you even understand what you’re asking us to do?!”

Kiyone demanded angrily.

Washu answered with equal seriousness.

“Of course I understand. I know how dangerous it is. And if you two get caught and the forged IDs are traced back to me, I won’t get away safely either.”

“Then why?” Kiyone almost pleaded.

“Because if we don’t do this, we’ll never find Lord Tenchi.”

Washu’s answer was sharp and absolute.

Kiyone fell silent.

Tenchi never being found… of course that thought hurt her too.

“……”

“Fine. I understand. You’re right—it was an unreasonable request. Forget I asked.”

Washu spoke so bitterly that Kiyone impulsively blurted:

“Fine! I’ll do it! Let me do it!”

But the instant she saw Washu grin wickedly, Kiyone regretted her decision already.

“Yay! Let’s do our best, Kiyone!”

Apparently oblivious to the gravity of the situation (probably because she *was* oblivious), Mihoshi grabbed Kiyone’s arm and danced excitedly.

“All right then! Since it’s settled, let me explain the plan!”

Washu looked positively alive now, like a mischievous kid about to carry out an enormous prank.

Kiyone could only curse her fate.

Though honestly, this was merely the beginning.

Many more opportunities to curse her fate still awaited her.

Amen.

The first disaster came when they successfully passed through the Science Academy gates using forged IDs.

Just as Kiyone breathed a sigh of relief—

"Wow, we actually got through! Washu really is amazing!"

—she heard Mihoshi's loud, carefree voice beside her and nearly doubted her own ears.

A security inspector looked their way suspiciously.

"S-sorry. It's my first time here, so I got excited..."

Kiyone desperately tried to cover things up, but Mihoshi puffed out her cheeks.

"It's *not* our first time! Don't you remember coming here during Galaxy Police training, Kiyone? We bought matching keychains as souvenirs that day—"

"Okay! Let's hurry along now!"

Realizing that the more Mihoshi talked, the worse things became, Kiyone grabbed her hand and hurried away at top speed.

Fortunately, no one pursued them.

But—

"Waaah! Kiyone! The gift shop is so much nicer than when we came during training! Look, look! They even have T-shirts with the Science Academy logo! And over there—stuffed dolls of the Science Academy mascot, 'Academan'! Hey, which souvenir should we buy for everyone?"

Another devastating airheaded punch from Mihoshi nearly knocked Kiyone unconscious.

But she couldn't give up now.

“Mihoshi, we didn’t come here to play.”

She tried speaking gently.

“Okaaay. Then I’ll just buy one thing. Hmm… should I get the ‘Academia Nuts’ or the ‘Science Manju’?”

Apparently Mihoshi’s personality would never change for the rest of her life.

Still, the Science Academy’s merchandising spirit was certainly impressive.

After somehow persuading Mihoshi to move on, Kiyone hurried toward the main computer room.

Naturally, Mihoshi still carried a full box of “Science Manju” (which sounded disgusting).

At any rate, after overcoming countless such hardships (?), the two successfully infiltrated the computer room. Following Washu’s instructions, they unlocked the system and safely transmitted the required data to her.

“Washu, this is enough, right?”

Kiyone spoke into the hidden Washu-made communicator she had brought.

“Yup! Perfect!”

Washu’s cheerful voice came through.

“Then we’re leaving now.”

But just as Kiyone moved to end the transmission, disaster struck yet again.

“Oh, since you already snuck in, stay there a little longer. I might need something else.”

“What are you *talking* about?! Washu, what if we get caught?!”

“It’ll be fine. As long as I don’t report you.”

“…What?”

“If you don’t want me to report you, stay there until I say you can leave. Bye now, ciao!”

And with that, the transmission cut off.

“Wait! Washu! Washuuuu!”

But Kiyone’s cries were futile. Washu had already switched off the communicator.

Meanwhile beside her, her carefree partner merely smiled brightly.

“Hey, Kiyoneee, if we’re staying longer, can we visit the gift shop one more time?”

Would the two of them survive long enough to leave the Science Academy alive?

Even genius scientist Washu, listening in through concealed precision microphones, found herself growing uneasy.

In any case, using the data sent by Mihoshi and Kiyone, Washu continued tracing Tenchi’s whereabouts.

At last she detected Tenchi’s energy signature in a certain town.

That town was downtown Tokyo.

A place where old and new, warmth and indifference coexisted.

A place where buildings and giant trees that had miraculously survived many turbulent eras still remained scattered throughout the modern city, generating strange energies.

Tenchi was there.

Washu contacted Ryoko and Ayeka during their travels and instructed them to head to Tokyo. She also handed Ryoko a wristwatch-type “Tenchi Detector.”

“Listen carefully. If Lord Tenchi appears nearby, this detector will react. Don’t miss it.”

The two women nodded seriously and departed for Tokyo carrying the detector, their hearts swelling with anticipation at finally seeing Tenchi again.

Meanwhile, Nobuyuki visited the grave of his late wife Achika carrying white lilies.

Today, he had finally filed a missing persons report with the police for his son, Tenchi.

The conversation at the station replayed in his mind.

“Let’s see… seventeen years old, male. Masaki Tenchi… Right. And when did he disappear?”

“About a month ago.”

“A month? You waited a whole month?”

“No, it’s not that we ignored it… there were some special circumstances.”

“Special circumstances?”

The officer looked at Nobuyuki suspiciously.

But the “special circumstances” were far too special to explain to a policeman.

He obviously couldn’t say:
“My son got caught between a space pirate and a princess of the Jurai royal family and probably just went into hiding.”

Nor could he say:
“My son is one-quarter alien, so we wondered if it might be related to that.”

Still eyeing him suspiciously, the officer changed directions.

“Did he behave strangely before disappearing?”

“No, not really…”

“Was he attending school properly?”

“Well, due to circumstances, he was taking a leave of absence.”

The officer’s expression grew even more suspicious.

But again, Nobuyuki could hardly explain the circumstances.

“Ah yes, we’ve had many guests from outer space lately, so things are crowded at home…”

No one would believe that.

“Your wife must be terribly worried. Where is she today?”

“My wife passed away long ago.”

“Ohhh.”

The officer suddenly looked as though he understood everything.

He stamped the paperwork a few times and said with a slightly contemptuous look:

“Well then, we’ll file this as a runaway case and circulate it to the prefectural police.”

Nobuyuki was furious.

He knew exactly what the officer was thinking.

That Tenchi was some delinquent son nobody worried about even if he stayed gone for a month.
That he was a truant.
That it was all due to growing up without a mother.
That this wasn’t really a disappearance at all—just a teenager running away from home.
That they probably wouldn’t find him.

Something like that.

Nobuyuki burned with anger.

Tenchi isn’t that kind of son!

Our family isn’t like that!

The son Achika and I raised—
The family Achika and I built—
wasn’t like that!

But he had no idea how to explain any of it.

And he was even angrier at himself for leaving the station without saying anything.

Before he knew it, he had arrived at Achika’s grave.

Placing flowers before it, he spoke softly.

“Hey, Achika. You’re not fair. You got to see only the cute years before you left. Seventeen… that’s the age we met, isn’t it? Somehow that little Tenchi grew up that much. I wonder what we were thinking about when we were seventeen. Hey, Achika… protect Tenchi. Please. Protect our boy.”

“Protect Tenchi.”

Again and again he prayed before the grave, then finally turned toward home with heavy steps.

"I've gotten home awfully late. Father-in-law must be worried."

Even so, his feet would hardly move.

Eventually, through the evening darkness, he saw the silhouette of the house.

Back in his high school days, Nobuyuki used to sketch it as his dream house from afar.

Later, when he and Achika began dating, it became *their* dream house.

When it came time to rebuild Achika's family home after their marriage, both of them immediately decided to build that dream house.

Their time living there together had been brief, but incredibly happy.

And even after Achika passed away, living there with her keepsake—their son Tenchi—had been Nobuyuki's happiness.

But now, the dream house was filled with silence.

Achika's smile was gone.
Tenchi's lively voice was gone.

Holding an unbearable loneliness in his heart, Nobuyuki stood staring at the dream house that had finally become reality.

< Old Tale ③ >

Time itself seemed restless, eager to usher in a new era.

The man lived and ate alongside a large group of warriors wearing matching coats.

Though called “warriors,” few had been born into distinguished families. Most were passionate young men hoping to earn merit through service in this group and become true samurai.

The duty assigned to them by the authorities was policing the city. But because the age was one of upheaval, sword fights occurred frequently, and the townspeople feared them more than they relied on them.

Even so, the man loved this group.

There were dreams here.

Dreams of rising in status.
Dreams of creating a brighter future for the nation.

The innocent dreams of youth delighted him.

Even when they crossed swords and wounded one another, it somehow still felt spirited and bright.

Perhaps it was simply the exhilaration that comes before the arrival of a new age.

And then, the new era finally arrived.

But that new age cruelly cast them aside.

Their masters lost the war, and their leader immediately became a criminal.

Under the new government, even the fact that they had once protected the city was forgotten. Some even claimed they had merely been a gang of violent thugs.

Certainly, they had lost.

Certainly, many of them were uneducated country youths with little ideology or learning.

Certainly, they may truly have been violent men who understood nothing of politics.

And yet, the man believed that was precisely why they had been so pure.

Victory and defeat are not the same as good and evil.
No—there is no simple morality play of righteous good triumphing over evil in this world.

Why could the people of this world not understand such a thing?

In the garden of the house that had once served as the group's headquarters, the man planted a single tree as though mourning the many war dead.

Then he vanished.

This was a tale from the Meiji Restoration—

The era when Japan broke its long isolation and stepped forward into a new world.

Chapter 5:

Seventeen Years Old ・A Lead at Last

“Welcome!”

“Thank you very much!”

“Let me repeat your order. One A set, one hamburger steak set, and two hot coffees after the meal, correct?”

Girls dressed in matching striped uniforms moved briskly about the restaurant.

This was a family restaurant located in one of Tokyo’s old downtown neighborhoods. No matter the hour, there always seemed to be people eating or drinking tea, and the flow of customers never stopped. Most of the waitresses were student part-timers or housewives working shifts. It could hardly be called heartfelt service, but they provided decent, manual-following hospitality.

However, among them were two waitresses completely unlike the others.

They were, of course, Ryoko and Ayeka.

The two of them were working part-time at this downtown family restaurant while searching for Tenchi’s whereabouts.

Originally, Ryoko was a space pirate, and Ayeka a princess. Neither of them seemed remotely suited for the service industry. The only reason they worked here was because the conditions were ideal: room and board included, daily pay, and a shift system that left them some freedom to continue searching for Tenchi.

For them, it was a wonderful job.

Whether they were wonderful employees from the manager’s perspective, however, was another matter entirely.

Ryoko was rough with her work and quick-tempered with customers. Ayeka was polite enough, but unbelievably slow. Together, they made a rather terrible pair of employees. It was a mystery they hadn’t been fired already, though perhaps the restaurant was simply understaffed.

But today, the two were worse than ever.

After all, only yesterday they had finally seen Tenchi—the Tenchi they had dreamed of finding—only to watch him vanish before their eyes. There was no reason for them to be in a good mood. And neither of them were exactly the sort to bravely work through emotional pain with cheerful determination.

"What'd you say? You telling me you can't eat the Italian hamburger steak I brought you?"

That was Ryoko's voice.

The poor customer stammered nervously.

"N-no, it's not that... it's just that I ordered the German-style hamburger steak..."

"German? I don't like those uptight Germans much. Italians are way better—bright and cheerful. Trust me, you'll be happier with the Italian one."

"Y-yes..."

Intimidated by Ryoko's low, threatening tone and nonsensical persuasion, the timid-looking man pitifully began eating the Italian hamburger steak.

Apparently, he hated cheese.

Namu Amida Butsu.

"Certainly. One A set and an orange juice, correct?"

This time it was Ayeka speaking.

"No, no! Are you even listening? A B set and a cream soda!"

"Ah... a C set and a mixed juice..."

"That's not what I said!"

The customer finally gave up before the utterly unmotivated Ayeka did.

"Fine! Just bring me the C set and mixed juice already!"

"Yes, yes... um... one B set, banana juice, and..."

Even without a Yoshimoto comedy troupe around, the customer practically fell out of his chair.

Good luck to him.

And to make matters worse, by 2 PM the two of them had already broken twelve plates since morning.

For the record, Ryoko smashed dishes by slamming them down carelessly with a loud *CRASH!*, while Ayeka broke them by absentmindedly tripping and tumbling over with an enormous *CLATTER-CRASH-BANG!*

At last, even the mild-mannered manager issued them a yellow card.

“You two seem tired today. Why don’t you call it a day?”

At first glance, his words sounded kind, but he firmly added:

“I’ll let it slide today, but if you’re like this again tomorrow, I’ll have to ask you to quit. And as usual, the cost of the broken dishes will be deducted from your wages.”

Perfectly reasonable, but still rather harsh.

The two merely replied with lifeless “Okay...”s, changed sluggishly in the locker room, and left the restaurant.

Watching them go, the manager murmured worriedly:

“They really are acting strange today...”

A warmhearted man, typical of the old downtown district.

“They’re always like that,” grumbled the kitchen supervisor, who constantly suffered from their order mistakes.

Understandably so.

Rather than return to the shabby inn near the station that the restaurant provided as lodging, Ryoko and Ayeka sat side by side on a park bench.

The tiny park, nestled among the hotels near the station, had almost no playground equipment—only the small bench they occupied, a swing set, and concrete statues of a rabbit and a turtle.

Even though the sun was still high, the scent of grilled chicken drifted from nearby drinking establishments, giving the area that characteristic downtown atmosphere.

From somewhere came the faint sound of a shamisen being played...

Ryoko pulled a can of milk tea from a convenience store bag and handed it to Ayeka.

Ayeka accepted it, took a sip, and let out a huge sigh.

Ever since yesterday, no matter what she did, her thoughts returned to Tenchi.

The Tenchi who had calmly descended the temple steps had seemed slightly more mature, even stronger somehow. How could he have changed so much in less than half a year? What on earth had happened to him?

And then, right before their eyes, he had vanished like a mirage.

Was he caught up in some sort of incident?

Yet he hadn't looked cornered or distressed at all.

The Tenchi I love so dearly has disappeared.

But Tenchi is in this town.

And yet I cannot touch him.

Tenchi never looks our way...

Then does that mean he isn't really here?

No, he certainly is in this town.

But Tenchi is like a mirage...

The unanswered questions had spun endlessly through her head since yesterday, and once again Ayeka let out a long sigh.

Glancing sideways at her, Ryoko gulped down her canned coffee in one go, then kicked the empty can away and shouted:

"Ahhh, screw it! Forget it! No matter how much we think about it, we still don't know anything!"

"Ryoko..."

Seeing Ryoko deliberately acting cheerful, Ayeka tried to pull herself together and answered as brightly as she could.

"You're right. Thinking about it won't solve anything."

The two sprang energetically from the bench and started walking, discussing where they should search next since they had gotten off work early for once.

Still, it was only natural they were so depressed.

After leaving the Masaki household in spring, they had searched all over Okayama City, then throughout the prefecture and neighboring regions.

And after Washu told them Tenchi had to be somewhere in this downtown area of Tokyo, they had continued searching every corner of the city while working at the family restaurant.

Even if it seemed futile, they tried everything they could think of.

They checked resident registries at city offices. They carried around Tenchi's photograph and questioned people like detectives. They investigated nearby schools and attended festivals and public events whenever they heard crowds would gather there.

And almost every day they visited the neighborhood temple to pray.

"Please let Tenchi be safe. Please let us find him soon."

Now, summer was already nearing its end.

That day, after finding nothing useful in the student registry of an art vocational school they had investigated, the two were leaving with heavy hearts.

Classes had apparently just ended, and students poured noisily out through the school gate.

Suddenly, Ayeka gasped.

"Ah!"

Ryoko followed her gaze—

and there was Tenchi.

Or rather, to be precise, there was Tenchi walking together with a woman who had affectionately entwined her arm around his.

"What's this about, Haruna?"

"Hehehe... an ambush."

Their conversation did not reach Ryoko and Ayeka, but even from afar, the intimacy between them was unmistakable.

“Tenchi!”

It was Ryoko who shouted and dashed forward.

Ayeka remained frozen in place, staring at the close pair in shock.

Tenchi showed no sign of noticing either Ryoko or Ayeka.

Then, just as the woman beside him casually turned her eyes toward the approaching Ryoko—

the outlines of both Tenchi and the woman began to blur.

And once again, like a mirage, they vanished completely...

The beloved Tenchi—

the missing Tenchi—

was in this town.

And yet he wasn’t.

Whenever they tried to reach him, he disappeared like an illusion...

“Let’s... go home...”

That night, Ayeka was the one who finally said it.

Sitting on the thin futon in the shabby inn room provided by the restaurant, tears welled in her eyes.

“We’ve made a terrible mistake. Lord Tenchi cannot return by his own will.”

“Ayeka, don’t jump to conclusions.”

But Ryoko’s words seemed not to reach her.

“Ryoko, you saw it too, didn’t you? Lord Tenchi... and that woman...”

Unable even to say the words aloud, Ayeka lowered her eyes.

Ryoko stared straight at her.

“Yeah, I saw them. But that doesn’t mean that woman’s necessarily in that kind of relationship with Tenchi.”

“Then what is she? Just a friend? An insurance salesperson? Someone asking for directions? Don’t be ridiculous! How naïve can you be?!”

“Yeah, fine, call me naïve. I get it. Then you go ahead and run back to Jurai already! A princess’s love is only worth that much anyway. Go home and cry in your mommy and daddy’s arms!”

“What did you say? Are you claiming my feelings aren’t genuine?”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I’m saying. At least compared to my passion, they lose. At this rate, you’ll lose to that woman beside Tenchi too! Seriously, you’d better give up and back off now.”

“How dare you! Just because I’ve been quiet doesn’t mean you can say whatever you want! My pure feelings could never lose to a filthy space pirate like you!”

“There’s nothing more troublesome than an older woman’s innocent love. Tenchi’s probably sick of it.”

“What?! Lord Tenchi is the one troubled by being stalked by a wanted criminal like you!”

“Oh yeah? Then let’s ask Tenchi himself.”

“Gladly!”

The moment Ayeka raised her stance to retaliate and met Ryoko’s eyes, she suddenly laughed softly.

“It’s been a long time since we shouted and fought like this…”

“Yeah,” Ryoko answered with a grin.

“Somehow I feel better now. Thank you, Ryoko.”

Hearing such honest gratitude embarrassed Ryoko in spite of herself.

“Cut it out! That’s not it. I just don’t want to give up until I’ve met Tenchi and heard the truth from him.”

“Meet Lord Tenchi… and confirm it…”

Ayeka repeated the words slowly.

“That’s right. First of all, isn’t this whole thing weird? Why does Tenchi disappear like an illusion whenever we get near him? And I don’t know what relationship he has with that woman, but if Tenchi hates me, then fine. But I want him to tell me that himself. I can’t stand this—him just disappearing, and his feelings remaining forever buried in darkness!”

Ayeka silently studied Ryoko’s face.

“Ryoko… you really are strong.”

“Strong? I’m not strong at all. I’m just a weak woman clinging to the tiniest shred of hope. Honestly, I disgust myself. I’m going to sleep. Good night.”

With that, Ryoko pulled the futon over her head completely.

Ayeka whispered another “thank you” in her heart and lay down as well.

Thoughts of the vanished Tenchi and the woman beside him still tormented her, but tonight it comforted them both to know someone else beside them carried the same pain.

Riin…

Somewhere, insects chirped.

A man stood outside the window of the room where the two women had finally fallen asleep.

He was Katsuhito Masaki, dressed not in his usual hakama, but casually in a T-shirt and jeans.

Had he come because he was worried about Ryoko and Ayeka?

Even so, he showed no sign of intending to meet them.

“The air… is stagnant.”

Muttering those cryptic words, he wore an expression both troubled and sorrowful as he began walking through the night streets.

Summer, too, would soon end.

☆☆☆☆☆

Around that same time, Sasami—who had returned to Planet Jurai—was taking a walk through the palace courtyard.

Ever since returning to Jurai, she had secluded herself in the Royal Chamber, searching for Tenchi's whereabouts.

Yet she had found absolutely nothing.

And increasingly, it was precisely that *absence* of clues that disturbed her.

Tenchi carried the blood of the Juraian royal family. No matter where in the universe he was, if she searched using Jurai's power as a shrine maiden within the Royal Chamber, it made no sense for her to find nothing at all.

Even if she couldn't pinpoint his location, she should at least be able to sense his presence or spiritual waves.

If she sensed nothing whatsoever...

then perhaps Tenchi no longer existed in this world.

"Big Brother Tenchi is already gone from this world."

The thought was terrifying beyond words.

Ever since confronting that possibility, Sasami had desperately tried to deny it by spending even more time in the Royal Chamber searching for him.

Worried she was overworking herself, Azaka and Kamidake suggested she take a walk in the courtyard.

Yet even the beautiful natural scenery of Jurai, which she had not seen in some time, did nothing to comfort her heart.

Stopping before the statue of Yosho in the courtyard, Sasami looked up at it.

The statue resembled Tenchi so much that she found herself asking aloud:

"Big Brother Tenchi... where did you go?"

Hearing this, Azaka murmured sympathetically:

"It reminds me of when Lord Yosho disappeared long ago... perhaps it is the fate of their bloodline."

“Uncle Yosho?”

“Yes.”

“When he went to Earth?”

Sasami was struck by the phrase *fate of the bloodline* and asked what had caused Yosho’s disappearance.

“In simple terms… you could call it an elopement.”

“Elopement?”

The answer shocked her.

“Yes. It was a romance across social classes. Faced with fierce opposition, Lord Yosho abandoned his position as heir to the Juraian throne and chose to live with that woman instead.”

“But… wasn’t Big Brother Tenchi’s grandmother from Earth?”

A perfectly natural question.

Why had he not stayed with the woman he loved enough to abandon his homeland?

“What happened after he left Jurai, we do not know. Nor what became of that woman… I believe her name was written with the character for camellia… Tsubaki…”

“Tsubaki?”

Sasami suddenly remembered Ryoko saying the last place she had seen Tenchi was in front of a camellia tree…

“Tsubaki?”

“Yes, apparently that woman’s name is written with the character for camellia and pronounced Haruna.”

Unable to ignore the strange coincidence surrounding the name *Tsubaki*, Sasami contacted Washu’s laboratory and told her everything Azaka had said.

But as she spoke, she began worrying it might not actually be useful information at all.

“Maybe it really has nothing to do with it. Big Brother Tenchi disappearing and Uncle Yosho’s old lover…”

But suddenly Washu burst into delighted laughter.

“Washu? What’s wrong?”

Trying to suppress her laughter, Washu answered:

“This is an incredible breakthrough. Sasami, you’ve done wonderfully. We’re going to find Lord Tenchi.”

“Huh?”

Sasami blinked blankly.

Washu added with a wink:

“I think we’re going to need reinforcements very soon, so hurry back to Earth immediately!”

“Washu!”

Before Sasami could ask what she meant, the communication abruptly ended.

Looking down at Ryo-Ohki at her feet, she asked:

“What do you think that means?”

“Meow?”

Ryo-Ohki looked equally confused.

“But she said we’ll find Big Brother Tenchi, right?”

“Meow!”

“All right then, Ryo-chan. Let’s hurry back to Earth!”

“Meow! Meow!”

Suddenly energized, Sasami immediately began preparing to leave for Earth.

Though unlike Mihoshi infiltrating the Science Academy, she did *not* run off to buy “Juraian rice crackers” or “Juraian T-shirts.”

Just for the record.

Meanwhile, our genius scientist Washu had already contacted Mihoshi and Kiyone at the Science Academy after cutting off communication with Sasami.

“So, how’s it going?”

Washu asked lightly.

Kiyone exploded in frustration.

“How should it be going?! You stopped contacting us entirely!”

“Sorry, sorry. Things got busy with my investigation over here...”

“We’ve been living every day terrified someone will discover we infiltrated this place!”

“Oh? Yet despite that, doesn’t Lady Mihoshi look like she’s gained a little weight?”

Indeed, compared to the utterly exhausted Kiyone, Mihoshi looked healthy and even slightly plumper.

“Yes! The Science Academy cafeteria is nutritionally balanced *and* delicious, so I’m doing great!”

Mihoshi answered cheerfully.

Washu smiled right back.

“Well, that’s wonderful.”

“Yes~!”

“It is NOT wonderful! I hate living like this already!”

As Kiyone shouted irritably, Washu grinned.

“Now, now, calm down. I was thinking of bringing you back soon anyway.”

“Really?!”

Kiyone practically clung to the communicator.

“Yes, really. But before that, I need you to do one more thing.”

“And once that’s done, we can leave the Science Academy?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll do it! I’ll do anything!”

For someone like Kiyone, who had always lived with pride as a Galaxy Police officer, existing as an illegal infiltrator was clearly unbearable pressure.

But Washu, true mad scientist that she was, completely ignored concepts like justice and said:

“I need you to hack a certain system using the Science Academy’s computers!”

“W-w-wha...?!”

Kiyone was too stunned to continue.

Washu laughed merrily.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. If you do exactly what I say, it’ll be easy.”

“No way! That’s a crime!”

“Oh please, you’re already a full-fledged criminal. Or would you rather I report your illegal infiltration to headquarters?”

Kiyone knew perfectly well she had no choice.

Still, as she watched Mihoshi beside her absentmindedly munching strawberry Pocky and asking:

“Hey, Kiyone, what’s hacking?”

...she struggled desperately to suppress the urge to strangle her.

< Old Tale ④ >

The man wandered aimlessly through the night streets.

Thinking back, the planet had changed enormously since the first day he set foot upon this land. Even at night the city was bright, and the streets overflowed with people.

As he absentmindedly walked through an alleyway, a young man running past collided with him.

“Excuse me,” the man said.

The youth glanced at him and suddenly held out a book.

“What is this?”

“I wrote it. You can have it.”

Just as the man was about to reply, several men came rushing into the alley entrance.

“There he is!”

At the shout, the youth spun around in alarm and vanished down an even narrower passage branching off the alley. The men charged after him.

That was how the man and the youth first met.

The book the young man had written described ideals for a society where all people could live equally. The ideology running through it was one currently forbidden in this country. Apparently, the youth was being pursued by the police because of it.

The man grew close to the youth. He even began accompanying him to meetings of the organization the youth belonged to.

But gradually, the organization became suspicious.

Though they lamented the suffering of the common people and called themselves patriots, they repeatedly held lavish banquets funded by businessmen eager to purchase information from them.

The man warned the youth that this was wrong.

The youth admitted he thought so too, but answered vaguely.

Yet by then, the youth was already trapped within the great tide of the era, unable to escape it.

Eventually, the organization launched a massive coup.

The coup lasted several days but ultimately failed.

Though the youth had not directly participated, he was arrested and executed by firing squad.

The cause was that very book he had handed the man when they first met.

On the cold morning the man heard the youth had been executed, he planted a tree by the riverbank where the two of them had often walked and talked together, then left the city.

Government authorities searched for the man, who had frequently attended the organization's meetings.

But they found no trace of him whatsoever.

It was the sixth year of the Showa era.

A story from the time when this country was beginning to step deeply into an age of darkness.

Chapter 6:

Another Nineteen

Katsuhito was climbing the long stone steps leading to Masaki Shrine. He was not dressed in the casual western clothes he had worn earlier in Tokyo, but rather in his usual *hakama*. Surrounded by the rich nature here in Okayama, the first signs of autumn could be felt a step ahead of Tokyo. Despite being located further south than the capital, the air felt cooler.

Though it was a long flight of stairs, it was a path he knew by heart. Katsuhito climbed to the top without losing his breath, pausing serenely to gaze at the trees that were just beginning to change color and the red dragonflies flitting about.

At the top of the stairs stood the familiar entrance to his home.

"I'm home. I have returned," he said, sliding the door open with a click.

As if he had been waiting on pins and needles, his son-in-law, Nobuyuki, rushed out immediately.

"Father! Where on earth have you been?!"

"I told you I was stepping out for a moment, didn't I?"

"Even if you said that, it’s been two whole days! Of course I'd worry. I started to think that maybe *you* had vanished into thin air too..."

Katsuhito cut off Nobuyuki's mounting protests.

"I am going nowhere. I am the chief priest of Masaki Shrine."

There was an underlying gravity in his voice that caused Nobuyuki to fall silent. Just then, a young girl poked her head out from the living room.

"Welcome back, Lord Katsuhito."

Nobuyuki, who had felt an unapproachable aura around Katsuhito just a moment ago, looked immensely relieved.

"Washu-chan has been waiting for your return this whole time, Father."

However, contrary to Nobuyuki's hope that this would break the tension, Katsuhito and Washu simply stared at one another without a hint of a smile.

"Uh..."

Paying no mind to Nobuyuki, who was looking back and forth between the two of them in utter confusion, Washu kept her eyes locked onto Katsuhito.

"I came because there is something I must ask you, Lord Katsuhito."

For a while, Katsuhito continued to look at Washu's face in silence. Eventually, his expression softened.

"It has been a long time, Washu-san. Would you care to join me for a walk in the back hills to enjoy the cool evening breeze?" he invited.

The two walked in silence through the hills behind the shrine, where the essence of autumn was beginning to drift. Crows flew overhead, cawing as they headed back to their nests. An orange sun moved slowly toward the earth across the twilight sky.

Katsuhito suddenly came to a halt. Glancing around, Washu spoke up as if she understood immediately.

"It's here, isn't it? In front of this camellia tree... where Tenchi-dono disappeared."

Katsuhito nodded silently. Stroking the trunk of the camellia tree, he began to speak.

☆☆☆☆☆

This is a story from back when I was still on Jurai.

At the time, I suppose I was just a year or two older than Tenchi is now. Of course, because people age differently on Earth than they do in Jurai, I am speaking purely in terms of physical appearance...

As you already know, Washu-san, my name back then was Yosho.

I was receiving the education of a prince, destined to succeed the throne of the Jurai Royal Family. However, a meeting with a certain woman completely changed my destiny.

That woman was Haruna—the one you wish to know about.

Haruna was the daughter of a house that had served the Juraian Royal Family for generations, and she came to the royal palace to act as my personal attendant.

She was gentle, cheerful, wise, yet modest. I grew incredibly fond of Haruna as she took care of my daily needs.

At first, however, I simply thought of her as a lovely girl. I am sure Haruna cared for me too, but I believe it was a feeling of devotion toward her master. Bound by existing conventions, neither of us ever considered the other as a potential romantic partner.

But eventually, we became aware of each other's true feelings. And precisely because we had suppressed them for so long, once we realized them, there was no stopping it.

Haruna tried to draw back, believing her social status made her unworthy, but I could not bring myself to let her go.

I approached my father, the Emperor of Jurai, and requested to marry Haruna. But what my father did instead was banish Haruna from the royal palace.

"With time, you will forget," my father said. But I could not believe such a thing. For me to forget Haruna... it was impossible.

Secretly keeping it from my father, I searched for Haruna's whereabouts. I finally discovered that she had hidden herself from me and was staying at the home of a distant relative.

I went to see her, but I was blocked by her uncles and could not meet her. They told me, *"Haruna is not a suitable match for the one who is to become the next Emperor of Jurai."*

And so, I made my decision.

I would abandon my position as prince...

Even if it meant throwing away my title, my home planet, and absolutely everything else, I wanted Haruna.

Though Haruna resisted at first, she eventually yielded to my feelings, and we abandoned Jurai.

Fleeing like criminals under the cover of darkness from the beloved homeland where we were born and raised... it was a painful experience for both myself and Haruna.

We stared out from inside the ship at the planet Jurai—which we would likely never see again—watching it for the longest time until it finally vanished from sight. I can never forget the way Jurai looked at that moment. Long after it had shrunk into a tiny speck of stardust, it felt as though it was still seeing us off.

However, life inside the ship was joyful.

Like newlyweds embarking on their honeymoon, we fully relished our time together, as if to make up for the time we had been torn apart.

Even though we were being pursued by the Juraian Royal Family and lived a nomadic existence, wandering from place to place, we were happier than anything just to be together.

Yet, as we journeyed aimlessly through the endless universe, an overwhelming sense of loneliness eventually crept over us.

So, we began to think about settling down on some planet. A distant planet somewhere, far beyond the reach of Jurai's influence...

After gathering data on various worlds, the planet we chose was Earth.

It was a frontier planet, but it was said to be covered in abundant water and trees, much like Jurai. Looking at the data and holographs of Earth, we spent hours talking happily about all sorts of things for our future.

Once we landed on Earth, we would live quietly in a small house. We talked tirelessly about how many children we wanted.

But by that time, unbeknownst to me, Haruna's body—having been subjected to the hardships of our grueling journey—was already being ravaged by illness.

☆☆☆☆☆

"Lord Katsuhito..."

As Katsuhito poured out the story all at once and then cast his eyes downward, Washu murmured, at a loss for words.

Katsuhito’s hand continued to stroke the camellia tree with deep affection.

Steeling her resolve, Washu asked, "Haruna-san passed away, didn't she?"

She knew it must be a painful subject for Katsuhito, but she had to ask.

Katsuhito nodded absentmindedly.

"Yes. Just before we reached Earth... And so, I buried Haruna on the very Earth where we had promised to live together."

"Along with the camellia?"

"Yes. The camellia was originally the control system of my spaceship."

"And this is that same camellia tree?"

When Washu asked this, pointing to the tree Katsuhito kept stroking, Katsuhito shook his head.

"No, it is not. When I landed on Earth, I intended to live alongside Haruna and the camellia tree. But the memories of Haruna were far too heavy a burden to carry forward. Furthermore, as a Juraian, it was difficult for me to remain in one place for long. After arriving on Earth, I realized that the flow of time on Earth and on Jurai was completely different. Even when the children born on Earth grew into adults and had children of their own, I did not age at all. It was as if time was bypassing me alone..."

That made sense. When Yosho disappeared from Jurai, Earth probably hadn't even taken the shape of the world it was today.

Just how much lonely time had Yosho—no, Katsuhito—spent on Earth?

"Then, what is this camellia?"

Washu brought the conversation back to the tree, trying as much as possible to avoid probing into the past Katsuhito preferred not to touch.

"It is a cutting from the camellia I buried with Haruna. It was painful to be with it, but I found I couldn't live apart from it either. So, I took a part of the camellia with me and continued my travels, planting cuttings of it in the lands where I moved. By doing so, I felt as though I was continuing my journey together with Haruna..."

Katsuhito’s hand continued to stroke the camellia gently, just as before.

"Lord Katsuhito... I am sorry for asking you about such a painful matter. But Tenchi-dono's safety depends on this... Haruna-dono is..."

As if to cut off Washu's words, Katsuhito spoke.

"In all likelihood, that is the case... But as I am now, I have no right to blame Haruna."

Katsuhito spoke with trembling fists, as if unable to contain his anger toward himself. Washu had no idea what kind of words to offer him.

"Washu-dono, would you mind leaving me alone for a little while?"

When Katsuhito quietly said this while gazing at the camellia tree with distant eyes, Washu gave a soft nod and left the back hills by herself.

Left alone, Katsuhito looked up at the sky where the evening's first star was twinkling, recalling his final conversation with Haruna.

Haruna, pale-faced, lying in bed. A young Katsuhito—no, Yosho—holding her hand tightly. On the ship's monitor, the blue Earth was visible.

"Haruna, it's Earth. We're almost there."

"Yes..."

Haruna tried to smile. But her smile was instantly interrupted by a painful cough.

"Cough, cough..."

"Hang in there, Haruna."

"I'm fine." Acting strong so as not to worry him, Haruna shifted her eyes to the monitor.

"It's beautiful."

"Yes, it's beautiful. That is the planet where you and I are going to live."

When Yosho said this, Haruna smiled sadly.

"I wanted to live there with you."

Yosho grasped her tightly as she spoke with eyes full of resignation.

"Don't say such foolish things! You are going to live on Earth with me, Haruna!!"

Resenting their cruel fate, Yosho held her with all his might. In his arms, Haruna gasped for breath.

"It hurts, Yosho."

At her soft, involuntary cry, Yosho hastily loosened his grip.

"I'm sorry. Are you okay? But it’s your fault, Haruna. Saying 'I wanted to live there' in the past tense like that."

From within his loosened arms, Haruna looked up at Yosho, who was watching her anxiously.

"I'm sorry. I just felt a bit helpless."

Trying to cheer Yosho up, Haruna spoke brightly.

"Oh, it's nothing. Once you touch the fresh air and water on Earth, you'll be healthy again in no time," Yosho replied.

But in truth, both of them already knew. They knew that the time for parting was drawing near...

"Haruna!"

Because Haruna looked so fragile, as if she might vanish at any moment, Yosho cried out her name instinctively.

"It's alright. I will always be by your side, Yosho," Haruna answered with a gentle, Madonna-like smile.

"It's a promise, Haruna."

"Yes."

Their hands were locked in a tight, firm grasp.

But that was the last conversation Haruna and Yosho ever had.

Even after Haruna passed away, Yosho stayed by her side for days, gazing at Earth together with her.

"What's wrong, Haruna? Look, Earth is right there. So why won't you open your eyes! You promised me, didn't you? That we would always be together... that we would be together forever and ever!"

Yosho repeated the words over and over again, but Haruna would never answer him again.

The sun had completely set, and the autumn insects were chirping.

"We will always be together. It's a promise, Haruna... huh."

Katsuhito looked back at the camellia tree once more. However, his eyes were not truly reflecting the tree.

The image of himself falling in love with his late wife, Itsuki, marrying her, and the three of them—including their only daughter, Achika—laughing happily together flashed through his mind and faded away. Those memories, which should have been joyful, now felt almost cursed.

"Haruna! Forgive me, Haruna!!"

Clinging to the camellia tree, Katsuhito squeezed out the words. From both of his eyes, tears spilled over uncontrollably, just like on that day when he lost her.

There is nothing in this world that does not change. Katsuhito knew this all too well, but on this night, the passage of time and his own changes felt utterly detestable and unbearable.

< Old Tale ⑤ >

"Hey mister, let's go!"

The man was currently walking along the shores of a lake, his hand being pulled by a young girl.

Since then—since that young man had been executed by firing squad—this country had spiraled straight into hell.

It sent its troops to various nations, killing innocent people and amassing wealth. The war expanded to a massive scale, growing far beyond what this small country could handle, and eventually, bombers from other nations began to indiscriminately slaughter innocent citizens. People lived in constant terror of the sound of bombers, impoverished and starving.

And then, the long war came to a close with the country's defeat. Although the people were liberated from the terror of the bombers, the hunger and poverty persisted.

The man was exhausted. Over the long years, he had observed many different people. And he had watched eras change. As an outsider, the gaze with which he viewed this country had already grown cold.

Yet now, holding this tiny hand and walking along the lakeside, he felt as though he could believe in the future of this planet. He wanted to believe that the beautiful sight he had witnessed from his spaceship was the true reality of this world.

The man remained in that land. Looking at the young girl brought peace to his heart.

However, having come from a different planet, the man tried to leave the land many times. He told himself that he and the girl existed within different flows of time... In fact, even by the time the girl grew into a young woman, the man from a foreign world showed almost no signs of aging. When the young woman pressed him about this, the man finally resolved to leave, but she held him back with fierce determination. In the end, the man decided to live his life on Earth. To live within Earth's time...

From that moment on, strangely enough, the time that had previously bypassed him began to flow within him little by little.

Eventually, the man wed the young woman.

In the 30th year of the Showa era, in Okayama. Having begun to live in reality, the man was no longer a figure belonging to a mere tale.

Chapter 7:

Confronting the Nineteen and Seventeen-Year-Olds

"Is that Set A ready yet?"

"I've been waiting twenty minutes for my after-meal coffee."

"Excuse me, this isn't what I ordered."

As you might have guessed, this was the family restaurant where Ryoko and Ayeka were working. Now that summer vacation had ended and the student part-timers had left, the restaurant was incredibly busy. Working themselves to the bone provided a slight distraction for Ryoko and Ayeka, who hadn't found a single lead in their search for Tenchi since that day.

"Here you go! Salisbury steak combo, coming through!"

"For this table, we have Set B and the mixed pizza combo. That covers everything you ordered, correct?"

Seeing the two of them working so efficiently, the store manager was in an excellent mood.

"They're actually doing a pretty good job, aren't they?"

"Well, lately they've finally reached the level of average humans," the kitchen supervisor grudgingly admitted.

However...

Clatter, crash! **With tremendous force, Ayeka dropped her food-laden tray right onto the floor.**

"Oh boy, what are you doing now?" Ryoko muttered, stepping over to help clean up, only to freeze dead in her tracks.

Right in their line of sight sat Tenchi and the woman they had spotted the other day, dining intimately.

Even though they were in the middle of eating, the woman seemed unable to wait. She tore open a shopping bag and pulled out a small box. Removing a slender silver ring from inside, she tried it on her finger.

"Ah, I knew I made the right choice with this one!"

"Haruna, we're in the middle of a meal. Couldn't you look at it carefully after we get home?"

"But it's a matching ring with Tenchi, something I've only ever dreamed of. I'm just so happy."

She stared at her hand with the ring on it, letting out a joyful chuckle.

"Honestly, you're hopeless. But it was pretty expensive, you know. We're going to have to tighten our belts a bit..."

"It'll be fine, it'll be fine. Don't worry about a thing, Tenchi."

Saying this, she reached for her half-eaten macaroni gratin and giggled happily again.

"Look, look! Two pieces of macaroni are stuck together. They're just like you and me. How cute!"

"Geez, Haruna, you really are carefree. You completely win."

As he spoke, Tenchi suddenly noticed Haruna's expression stiffen.

"Haruna, what's wrong?"

Following her gaze, he saw two waitresses. It looked like one of them had dropped a tray, scattering food all over the floor.

"Ah, what a mess. Haruna?"

Tenchi assumed Haruna was frowning at the scattered food.

But Haruna remained fixated on the waitresses. No, she was glaring at them. It was as if she looked at them with pure hatred.

Just as Tenchi began to find Haruna's harsh glare suspicious, one of the waitresses suddenly marched straight toward their table.

"Tenchi!"

"???"

Why does this waitress know my name? Tenchi instinctively looked at Haruna.

"Is she an acquaintance of yours, Haruna?"

But Haruna shook her head violently, speaking with intense agitation.

"No, Tenchi. Don't look at her!"

Meanwhile, the waitress closed in on Tenchi with fierce intensity.

"Tenchi! It's me, Ryoko! What's wrong with you? Have you totally forgotten me?!"

Ryoko reached out, trying to grab Tenchi by the shoulder. But her hand clawed through empty air. Tenchi and Haruna's silhouettes lost their outlines, and within moments, the two vanished like a mirage...

"Tenchi?"

"Lord Tenchi!"

As the two cried out, the store manager rushed over to them.

"What do you two think you're doing?! Clean this up immediately!"

"It feels like I'm having a horrible nightmare..." Ryoko said, slumping down directly onto the tatami mats of their inn room.

"Even if it were a dream, there could be no dream more cruel than this..."

Ayeka sat down on the tatami as well, squeezing her hands tightly against her knees as if unable to bear the weight of it all.

It was pitch black outside, but neither of them had the energy to turn on the lights.

Ever since Tenchi vanished right before their eyes, they couldn't even remember how they had made it back to the inn. Whether they were working, walking, or doing anything else, their minds were entirely consumed by the thought of Tenchi and that woman fading away.

A hollow ache throbbed in their chests, making it hard to breathe.

Beep, beep, beep!

Suddenly, a ringing sound shattered the darkness. It was the communication chime from Washu. Under normal circumstances, it was a sound they would have

been desperately waiting for, but right now, it took them a moment to even process what it was.

Finally realizing what it was, Ryoko picked up the communicator. Instantly, Washu's hologram projected into the dark room, calling out with forced high energy.

"Helloooo! How's it going, you two?!"

"....."

"....."

Paying no mind to their heavy silence, Washu chattered away in her upbeat tone.

"What's this, what's this? You both look completely drained."

She paused for a moment with a sly, mischievous smirk before continuing.

"Could it be that Lord Tenchi vanished into thin air right in front of your eyes?"

"How do you know that?!"

"How could you possibly know?!"

Ryoko and Ayeka lunged forward toward the holographic Washu, practically screaming.

"Now, now, now, there's absolutely nothing that escapes the notice of this genius scientist, Washu-chan!"

Washu said it nonchalantly, but the two of them lacked even the energy to fire back with their usual sharp tongues. Feeling a bit guilty at their lack of response, Washu offered an explanation.

"Well, it did take me a little bit of time this once. After all, it turned out to be a story from a very long time ago."

"A story from a long time ago?" As the two questioned her with puzzled faces, Washu began to explain everything she had uncovered.

She told them how Yosho had once fallen in love with a woman named Haruna, abandoning Jurai to come to Earth. Tragically, Haruna passed away just before they arrived. She explained that Tenchi had disappeared in front of the camellia tree, which held Yosho's residual feelings for Haruna. Furthermore, Washu's investigation revealed that while Tenchi technically should have been right here in

the old downtown area of Tokyo, Sasami's powers as a shrine maiden couldn't detect his energy signature at all.

"Fine, but that still doesn't tell us where Tenchi actually is!"

Ryoko had listened to Washu's long explanation with an uncharacteristic amount of patience, but she finally hit her limit and pressed her for answers.

"Yes, yes. You're as impatient as ever. According to the findings of this genius scientist, Washu-chan...!"

Washu intentionally paused for dramatic effect.

"Lord Tenchi is inside a parallel world!"

"A parallel world?!?!?!"

Watching Ryoko and Ayeka shout in unison with a deeply satisfied nod, Washu moved on to her lecture.

"Yes, a parallel world. In other words, an alternate dimension that exists alongside our universe within the fourth dimension. To put it simply, it’s like a world inside a looking glass."

"Why the hell is Tenchi in a place like that?!" Ryoko demanded.

"He was likely drawn in by the spirit—or rather, the soul—of Haruna-dono."

"A spirit? You're telling me stuff like that actually exists?"

"Who knows? Even I don't understand the finer details of that area, but I firmly believe that human thoughts and lingering attachments are the most powerful forces in this universe. In all probability, Haruna-dono's unresolved grief attached itself to the camellia tree, which is packed with Juraian energy."

"But why target Lord Tenchi?" Ayeka asked this time.

"Well, that's where the real problem lies. It's likely because Lord Tenchi strongly resembles Yosho-dono, the one with whom she could never fulfill her love."

"Just because he resembles him? That's so unfair..." Ayeka murmured.

"Exactly! If she wanted someone, she should've just taken the old man instead!" Ryoko grumbled, looking thoroughly displeased.

Looking back and forth between the two, Washu spoke with an uncharacteristically contemplative tone.

"We won't know for sure unless we ask Haruna-dono herself, but there must have been something about Lord Tenchi that perfectly synchronized with her wavelength."

"Synchronized?" Seeing the two ask the exact same question simultaneously yet again, Washu looked amused. Even though they usually did nothing but fight, they were being remarkably in sync this time.

The two glared suspiciously at the grinning Washu.

"What is it?"

"What are you smirking at?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing at all. Now, where was I? Ah, right, the synchronization. If their wavelengths didn't match up, it would have been impossible for Haruna-dono to pull Lord Tenchi away, no matter how much she wanted to. That's why I believe there was some kind of shared frequency between Lord Tenchi and Haruna-dono. At any rate, that's how Lord Tenchi ended up in the parallel world, but because he is originally a resident of this world, his physical body hasn't completely anchored itself to that dimension yet. That's why he occasionally flickers back into our world. Unconsciously, that is."

"So, can we bring Tenchi back?" Ryoko asked eagerly, brushing aside the complex scientific jargon.

"Indeed! Every time we try to touch him, he simply vanishes!" Ayeka added, her face a mask of desperation as she looked for a way to retrieve him.

However, our beloved Washu-chan continued to explain the situation with her usual cool composure.

"Exactly. With the current state of the universe, it's impossible. That means we have to lock down and stabilize the dimensions between our world and the parallel world where Lord Tenchi is residing. Isn't that right, Kiyone-dono?"

As her name was called, Kiyone's hologram materialized in the room. She looked noticeably exhausted.

"I managed to hack into the Science Academy's dimensional stabilization system. They say that if you use this, you can alter the very orbit of a planet."

Hearing Kiyone's words, Ryoko and Ayeka blinked.

"You stole it?"

"Isn't that a federal crime?"

"....."

As Kiyone looked utterly knocked out by their blunt words, another hologram appeared to support her. It was Mihoshi.

"Oh no, Kiyone! Are you okay? Hang in there! I'm right here with you!"

Kiyone silently prayed for Mihoshi to leave her alone, but right now, she didn't even have the energy to voice it...

Ignoring the comedic duo, Washu went on to efficiently lay out the steps for Tenchi's retrieval operation.

"First, we will use the dimensional stabilization system to anchor the force fields of our world and the parallel world. To get the most efficient systemic energy for this, we will tap into the Juraian energy of the camellias that Katsuhito-dono planted in various regions. Sasami-chan and Ryo-Ohki have already headed toward Kyoto. Mihoshi-dono, please go to the Masaki Shrine in Okayama, and Kiyone-dono, head to Izu. You two will stay in Tokyo. You need to set up the energy devices on the camellia trees at each designated point. Make sure you don't mess this up."

"And what are you going to do?" Following Ryoko's question, Washu hesitated slightly before answering.

"I will be managing the main energy output from the actual location where Katsuhito-dono—or rather, Yosho-dono—buried Haruna-dono's remains and planted the original camellia tree. The location is a secret. It's a place sacred to Katsuhito-dono's memories, so I can't just go around telling people, not even you guys."

"Understood," everyone nodded, prompting Washu to continue.

"Using that energy, I will send Ryoko and Ayeka-dono directly into the parallel world, so the two of you must bring Lord Tenchi back together. In any case, we have to move while Lord Tenchi is still flickering back and forth between worlds. If he becomes a permanent resident of the parallel world, we might never be able to bring him back."

At Washu's words, tension gripped the room, and everyone swallowed hard. With the plan set to unfold as soon as preparations were complete, the meeting adjourned for the night.

"Say, what do you think it means for Lord Tenchi to 'synchronize' with Haruna-san?"

In the quiet room after the holograms had faded, Ayeka spoke to Ryoko, who was lying down beside her.

"Like I would know! We're gonna be busy tomorrow, so just go to sleep!"

Ryoko snapped aggressively, turning her back to Ayeka and pulling the futon completely over her head.

Yet, throughout that night, Ayeka could feel Ryoko's restless presence beside her, equally unable to catch a wink of sleep.

Chirp... Chirp...

The autumn insects chirped lonely melodies into the night, as if amplifying the girls' deep anxieties.

"What's wrong, Haruna? You seem down. Did we run around too much during the day?"

Tenchi asked, gently drawing Haruna into his arms and kissing the slender silver ring on her ring finger.

"No," Haruna answered shortly, looking displeased as she stood up from her chair. Looking up, a sky full of brilliant stars stretched out above the balcony.

After returning from their outing, Tenchi had been using the balcony to sketch Haruna as his model, but she had been in a foul mood the entire time. Even though she had been ecstatic during the day after buying the matching rings she had wanted for so long...

I really don't understand girls, Tenchi thought to himself. As Haruna slipped away from his grasp, leaving his arms awkwardly hugging empty air, he glanced down at his own ring finger. A silver ring identical to Haruna's glistened in the starlight. While he hadn't made a big fuss out of it like she did, it still gave him a warm, ticklish, and sweet sensation inside.

Turning back to face him, Haruna spoke with a hint of malice.

"You didn't actually want one, did you, Tenchi? A flashy trinket like this."

"That's not true."

"I mean, it doesn't seem like the kind of thing *that person* would wear."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb with me. Even if you only look at your sketches, I can tell perfectly well!"

"What are you even talking about?"

"That waitress girl from this afternoon."

"Huh?"

"It's her, isn't it? The girl you used to sketch before."

The sudden accusation caught Tenchi completely off guard. *The waitress girl? You mean one of the two who knocked over the tray? Now that she mentions it, one of them did look a bit like the imaginary girl I used to sketch... but I barely even remember her face.*

"You've got it all wrong. That drawing was just an image. I told you she was just a girl from my imagination, didn't I? I barely even remember what that waitress looked like."

"Really?"

"Really. Besides, in the first place..."

In the first place, what happened next? Those waitresses... did I actually watch them clean up the broken dishes? No, wait, when did we even leave that family restaurant?

As Tenchi fell into a bewildered silence, Haruna spoke up as if pulling him back to reality.

"Fine then, I'll let it go. I forgive you."

Though it was an incredibly self-centered way to forgive someone, Tenchi still let out a sigh of relief.

"Geez. You were pouting all this time over that? Don't be silly."

Smiling, Tenchi reached out to pull Haruna close again, but in that exact instant, the world warped violently.

The sky, the walls, the chairs, the tables—even the very air twisted in a sickening distortion.

Is it an earthquake? he thought, but no furniture toppled over. Instead, an absolute, heavy silence fell, leaving not a single sound.

And when the world snapped back to normal, two girls were standing on the balcony. It was Ryoko and Ayeka, who had just been teleported into the parallel world.

"Tenchi! We came to bring you home!"

"....."

Ryoko shouted with all her might, but Tenchi offered no response.

"You girls... how did you get here?" Haruna murmured in utter confusion.

Ignoring her completely, Ryoko lunged forward and grabbed onto Tenchi.

"Tenchi! It's me, Ryoko! Let's go home together!"

At her desperate plea, Tenchi finally opened his mouth.

"Ryoko? You definitely look like the girl from my sketches, but... that girl was just a figment of my imagination..."

As Tenchi struggled in total confusion, Ayeka pressed forward as well.

"Lord Tenchi! It is I, Ayeka. Please, you must remember us!"

"Ayeka..." Tenchi whispered, staring at the girl who was looking at him with an expression so intense she seemed on the verge of tears. *I really do feel like I've met her somewhere before...*

"Tenchi! Don't look at them! Don't look at those girls!!"

Hearing that piercing scream, Ryoko felt a sudden surge of intense rage toward Haruna. Until now, this woman had been a vague, abstract concept. But right now, she was undeniably real, standing right there and trying to steal Tenchi away from them.

"What did you say?! You're the one who dragged Tenchi into this bizarre world against his will!"

"Against his will?"

"That's right! Give Tenchi back to us!"

"I didn't force him to do anything! Tenchi came here because he *wanted* to come here!"

"Don't talk garbage!" Ryoko barked, and Ayeka quickly backed her up.

"That cannot possibly be true! You are explicitly manipulating Lord Tenchi's memories as we speak!"

"I am not manipulating anything! I don't possess that kind of power. I could never force someone into this world, nor could I force someone to love me..."

The moment the word "love" left her lips, the color drained from Ryoko and Ayeka's faces. Noticing their reaction, Haruna clung tightly to Tenchi and pressed her advantage.

"That's right. Tenchi loves me! He came to me because he was completely sick and tired of that world of yours!"

"Tenchi..." Ryoko whispered, watching him as he allowed Haruna to hold him. Tenchi stole a brief glance at Ryoko, but he kept his head lowered and said nothing.

"Now you understand, don't you? Now, get out of our world!"

The moment Haruna screamed, Ryoko and Ayeka were forcefully expelled from the parallel world.

When they opened their eyes, they found themselves drifting in a vast, pitch-black void of absolute nothingness.

"Ryoko-san..."

"Where the hell are we?"

As the two stared at each other in mounting dread, a voice echoed out from the darkness.

— *This is the darkness of my heart.* —

Though the voice wasn't particularly loud, it resonated through every corner of the space.

"Haruna?"

"Haruna-san?"

— I wanted to make sure I had a proper talk with you two. —

"About what?"

"What is it you want to say?"

— About myself, and about Tenchi. —

"About you?"

"And Lord Tenchi?"

— Yes. Because it seems you have a terrible misunderstanding. —

"We don't misunderstand a damn thing! You dragged Tenchi away to some twisted world against his will!"

— See, you really do misunderstand. Like I told you earlier, I cannot force Tenchi to come here. I don't have that kind of power. —

"Then why has Lord Tenchi forgotten all about us?!" Ayeka demanded.

— Because he wanted to forget. —

"Stop lying through your teeth!" Ryoko yelled.

— It isn't a lie. When I met him, Tenchi was thinking that he wished he could just disappear somewhere. That's why I brought him here, and we are continuing our ideal life together. —

"An ideal life for you and Tenchi?"

— Yes. After all... I have been so dreadfully lonely for a very, very long time. —

"You are completely mistaken!" Ayeka cried out.

— Am I? And how is that? —

"You do not love someone simply because you are lonely! Furthermore, Lord Tenchi does not even know the truth of this situation!"

— He has absolutely no need to know such unnecessary things. —

— At any rate, do not ever come into our world again. Goodbye. —

With that, the two were violently thrown out of the void once more, snapping back into reality.

The moment they returned, incoming transmissions from everyone who had been anxiously waiting for them flooded the communicator all at once.

"Big sister! Did big brother Tenchi come back with you?"

"Meow! Meow!"

"Tenchi-san! It's Mihoshi! Are you safe?!"

"What happened? If you both just sit there in silence, we won't know what's going on!"

Unable to answer any of the calls, Ryoko and Ayeka kept their heads bowed. In their stead, Washu's voice rang sharply through the device.

"Unbelievable...! That place wasn't a parallel world at all."

"It's not a parallel world?" everyone shouted in unison.

"If it's not a parallel world, then where on earth is it?" Ayeka asked, speaking for everyone.

"It's a world constructed entirely out of Haruna-dono's localized desires and manifestations."

"Constructed out of her desires?"

"Yes. I thought something felt off. Lord Tenchi appeared physically older than he is in our world, didn't he?"

"Yes. I did notice that he looked much more mature," Ayeka recalled.

"The timeline is completely different. On top of that, time isn't moving forward there; it's completely stagnant. As I explained at the start, a true parallel world should act as a direct reflection of this universe. It made no sense for the timeline to warp or for time to stand still. I never imagined that Haruna-dono's lingering attachments possessed enough raw energy to manifest an entirely separate reality... Ryoko? What's wrong? You're being awfully quiet."

Washu suddenly stopped to check on her. Normally, Ryoko would be the very first one to impatiently bombard her with questions.

"Now that you mention it..." Ayeka noted, glancing at the girl beside her. Even during their confrontation in Haruna's void, Ryoko had started off aggressive but had grown completely quiet halfway through.

"Shut up. It's nothing," Ryoko growled.

Shrugging her shoulders over the monitor, Washu continued.

"In any case, we have to find a way to bring Lord Tenchi back as quickly as possible, or he'll be completely absorbed into Haruna-dono's world. I'm going to run some more research to see how I can send you two back in there again. Until then, just stand by."

With that, Washu cut the transmission and locked herself away in her subspace laboratory.

For the time being, Sasami, Ryo-Ohki, Kiyone, and Mihoshi remained on standby at their respective locations.

Ryoko stormed out of the room without a word, leaving Ayeka standing alone in the quiet space, deeply lost in thought.

Chapter 8:

17 Years Old • Reclaiming the Future

"'I want to disappear from this place.' That's what he was thinking, and that's why I brought him here."

"If he didn't want to come, I wouldn't have been able to bring him."

"Tenchi loves me."

"He and I are living our ideal life together."

Damn it! That girl's—Haruna's—voice won't leave my head. No matter how many times I deny it, no matter how many times I tell myself it can't be true, the memory keeps flashing back.

Did Tenchi run away from us?

Did he grow to hate us?

That's a lie! It has to be.

But... did Tenchi ever tell me he liked me?

Even once?

Did he ever hold me tight, the way he held Haruna?

I can still see the two of them when we first arrived in that world, snuggled up so close and happy together.

Damn it, Tenchi.

Is that how it is?

Is that really how it is?

Come to think of it, I was always the one throwing myself at him.

I was always the one telling him I loved him.

Was I just a heavy burden to him?

When I really think about it, it makes sense.

I was always forcing my feelings on him, never once stopping to consider how Tenchi felt.

Besides, I'm not ladylike at all...

I'm just a completely alone, solitary space pirate...

Was I just a nuisance to him?

I'm sorry, Tenchi.

But... I love you.

I love you so much I don't know what to do with myself.

If you say you hate it, I won't force myself on you anymore.

But it’s okay if I keep loving you, right?

Will I never get to see you again...?

I want to see you, Tenchi. I want to see you...

"Ryoko-san."

Before I knew it, Ayeka was standing behind me. I wondered how long I’d been sitting here, completely spaced out on this park bench near the inn.

"We received a transmission from Washu-san. She says Haruna-san's world is on the verge of collapse."

Ayeka said this as she sat down on the bench beside me.

"What did you say?"

"She said the energy reactions are dropping rapidly. The camellia—which serves as Haruna-san's energy source—is reaching the very end of its lifespan."

"Then, what about Tenchi?!"

"If he stays there as he is, he will disappear along with Haruna-san's world..."

"No way!"

"Because the camellia's energy is failing, the energy we can use on our side is also severely limited. It seems we can only send one person into Haruna-san's world, one last time."

"....."

"Ryoko-san, you must go. Go and bring Tenchi-sama back."

"I'm not going!"

A loud voice burst out of me, surprising even myself.

I was grateful for Ayeka's feelings, trying to yield this chance to me, but the current me couldn't bring myself to say I wanted Tenchi back.

Because... Tenchi might actually be happier staying there.

If he really loves Haruna, then maybe disappearing together with her wouldn't be such a bad thing for him.

Just like how if I were with Tenchi, I wouldn't be afraid even if the final day of the world arrived.

"He's there because he wants to be. It's Tenchi's life. He can do what he likes with it."

"Do you truly believe that?"

Damn it. This woman really knows how to strike where it hurts. I don't believe it, not at all. Truth is, I want to drag him back even if I have to use force.

"I mean, the fact that he's in that world proves it, doesn't it? Washu said so herself—you can't bring someone there unless your wavelengths match up."

"And didn't you tell me, Ryoko-san, that we wouldn't know for sure until we asked the person himself?"

"That was then, this is now! I changed my mind. If Tenchi wants to stay there... then there's nothing we can do about it, is there?"

To my dismay, my voice hitched in my throat.

"But... did Tenchi-sama actually say that? Did he say he wished to stay there?"

"He didn't say it. He didn't say it, but he completely forgot about us, didn't he?!"

That's right. He looked at me with the eyes of a total stranger. Damn it, I don't even want to remember it.

"You are afraid, aren't you?"

"Afraid?!"

"Yes. You spoke so boldly to me, but in truth, you are terrified, aren't you? Terrified of confirming Tenchi-sama's true feelings!"

Why does this girl always know exactly what to say to make my blood boil?!

"Yeah, I'm scared! Is it so wrong to be scared?! What about you, huh? If you're so brave, why don't you go yourself?!"

I screamed at her, but Ayeka merely replied in a quiet, calm voice.

"I am terrified as well."

"Ayeka..."

Why does she have to be so honest today of all days? It's completely throwing me off my game.

"But you said it yourself, Ryoko-san. You said you hated the idea of letting things end like this without ever confirming Tenchi-sama's feelings. I feel exactly the same way. Furthermore, I believe this situation is fundamentally wrong."

"Wrong? You mean Haruna's world?"

"Haruna-san's world... or rather, the fact that Tenchi-sama is *in* Haruna-san's world. The world where Tenchi-sama belongs is here. This is Tenchi-sama's reality. Haruna-san claimed she is living an ideal life with Tenchi-sama. But that ideal life is surely something Tenchi-sama is meant to build with his own hands, right here in this world."

What? What is she talking about? This is getting too complicated.

"In short, are you trying to say Tenchi is running away to that world?"

"Yes... precisely. I could not find the right words for it, but yes. I believe he is running away."

"Because he hates us?"

My thoughts instantly gravitated right back to that dark place.

"...I do not know. Perhaps that is part of it, perhaps it is everything. But I have thought about it. You said you wanted to confirm things without running away, Ryoko-san. If that is the case, then Tenchi-sama must not run away either—he must give us his answer!"

I was stunned.

Deep down, I was truly, utterly stunned.

To think that Ayeka, whom I always wrote off as a sheltered, naive princess, had been thinking about all of this while I was busy moping around.

Suddenly, a burning urge not to be outdone started to well up inside me.

"If you've thought it through that much, are you really okay with this? With not going yourself? If I screw up, you might never get to see Tenchi ever again, you know?"

"Tenchi-sama will return! You are more than enough to go fetch him. There is absolutely no need for me to personally set out!"

I couldn't help but laugh out loud. For someone with a brain that overcomplicates everything, that excuse was downright pathetic.

"Heh, fine then. I'll go."

Feeling like I might burst into tears if I stayed still, I bounced up from the bench with sudden energy. Turning my back to Ayeka so she wouldn't see my face, I started walking away.

"Thanks,"

was all I could manage to squeeze out.

Damn it.

I'm pathetic. Totally uncool.

If I don't bring Tenchi back after this, I won't ever be able to look her in the face again.

God, I've never asked you for a single thing in my entire life.

This is the only time, the only favor I'll ever ask, so please listen to me.

Give me courage.

Looking up at the deepening autumn twilight sky, I found myself thinking thoughts completely out of character for someone like me.

"Got it? I feel like I've said this a thousand times already, but the energy of Haruna-dono's world is nearly depleted. If you don't bring Tenchi-dono back before that world vanishes, he will be trapped in the darkness for eternity."

"Yeah, yeah. I've heard it plenty of times already."

The holographic projection of Washu was repeating the exact same warnings she had been hammering into me for a while now.

"Are you really listening to me? And another thing..."

I cut Washu off and finished her sentence for her.

"'Ryoko, if you don't pull out of Haruna-dono's world fast enough, you're gonna disappear too'... right? Seriously, I've heard it a million times. Instead of nagging me, you'd better hurry up and teleport me, or Haruna's world really is gonna vanish before I get there."

"I know that! Right now, I'm concentrating the camellia's energy. As soon as the preparations are complete, I'll send you over immediately. Listen to me, Ryoko! I cannot stress this enough, the energy in Haruna-dono's world is..."

Fed up with Washu, who looked ready to repeat her entire lecture from the beginning, I shrugged my shoulders at Ayeka.

But Ayeka's expression remained deadly serious.

"Washu-san is worried. She is worried that if you fail to persuade Tenchi-sama, you might choose to disappear right along with him in that world, Ryoko-san..."

I blinked in surprise.

When it came to this whole ordeal, it turned out Ayeka was much sharper than me.

Having overheard Ayeka's words, the hologram of Washu flared up in an angry shout.

"Don't be ridiculous! Who on earth would be worried about her?!"

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes.

Man, I've been doing nothing but cry during this whole mess.

This is bad.

If I don't pull off a cool finale, my reputation is going to be completely ruined.

I turned toward the communicator and shouted out with all the bravado I could muster:

"Well, duh! Tenchi is coming back with me, obviously! As if I'd let anyone waste their time worrying about me!"

Washu looked slightly relieved by my outburst, but her face quickly tightened back up with tension.

"Preparations are complete. Ryoko, you're going."

Washu's sharp, commanding voice rang out.

5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 0!

I'm off, Ayeka.

I'm off, Washu.

I'm off, everyone.

I swear I'll bring Tenchi back with me!

< Old Tale ⑥ >

A year had passed since the man and the grown young girl had been wed. Today, the shrine where the two lived was unusually hectic and noisy.

The man, unable to sit still, paced back and forth along the wooden corridor.

"It will still be a while. There is no use in a man fretting over it. Why don't you go for a walk?"

Told this by his mother-in-law, the man had no choice but to head outside for a stroll.

When he reached the lake, he heard the faint sound of splashing water. Looking closer, he saw a small young boy playing, splashing in the water. The image overlapped perfectly with memories of his wife when she was a little girl playing in the water, and the man gazed out at the lake with deep emotion.

Then, he looked at his own reflection cast upon the water's surface. Dressed in the shrine's traditional *hanten* coat, he looked entirely like a man of Earth. Eventually, just as his mother-in-law must have requested, a young girl from the neighborhood came searching for him. As he hurried back home, a vibrant, energetic cry echoed all the way out to the entrance.

"Waaah! Waaah!"

As the man dashed toward his wife's bedroom, the booming voice of the old woman assisting the midwife echoed in his ears.

"It's born! It's a healthy baby girl!"

Yes, today was the day the man's child was to be born. Washed in her first bath and dressed in a pure white swaddling gown, the baby appeared to the man to be the most adorable living thing in the entire world.

And lying right beside her, wearing a deeply satisfied smile, was the woman who was the most precious person in the world to him.

"Thank you, Itsuki."

The man took the woman's hand into his and spoke softly.

"We have to think of a name,"

the woman replied, squeezing his hand back with an expression of pure happiness.

Three days later, after much deliberation, the baby girl was named Achika.

Everyone in the household was filled with absolute bliss.

No one paid any mind to the lonely camellia flower, swaying quietly on the mountain behind the house...

Chapter 9:

19 Years Old—Burning Out, The Eternal Summer...

Meen, min, min, min, min...

Zee—, zee, zee, zee, zee...

Meen, min, min, min, min...

Zee—, zee, zee, zee, zee...

The cicadas are noisy again today.

"Tenchi! If you don't wake up soon, you're going to be late!"

The sliding paper door rattled open, and Haruna peeked her face in.

"Yeah, I'm getting up now."

My body feels heavy because of the heat.

Paying no mind to me as I sluggishly sat up and hesitantly reached for the buttons of my sweat-stained pajamas, Haruna walked into the room and vigorously flung the window wide open.

"Look, it's beautiful weather again today!"

Ring...

Swayed by the breeze, the wind chime made a faint sound.

It’s the same morning as always.

The same ordinary, happy morning as always.

"Come on, Tenchi. Go wash your face quickly. Let's have breakfast!"

As she said this and started to leave the room, I called out to stop her without thinking.

"Haruna!"

"Hmm? What is it?"

"No... it's nothing."

"Strange Tenchi."

Saying this as if exasperated, she let out a little chuckle and left the room.

I swallowed my words.

What kind of words?

What was I going to ask Haruna?

It’s obvious.

Right now, I am completely filled with doubts.

Why does the exact same morning come day after day?

If yesterday was A, then today isn't B, it's A. And the day after tomorrow is A. The season is eternally summer. Just how long has this strange phenomenon been going on?

And those girls from yesterday. Why do girls from my imagination actually exist?

Where on earth did they come from to get into this room?

What exactly *is* this world?

That's right! It should definitely be hidden away right here. I opened the top drawer of the dresser. This is where the bankbook and personal seal should have been. A driver's license, a bankbook, anything would do. I felt like looking at official objects like that would help calm me down for the moment.

There it is!

But there is no name written on the cover of the bankbook.

Why?

I look inside.

I was struck speechless.

One, ten, hundred, thousand, ten thousand... just how many zeros are there? There's no way this is money from Haruna's part-time job. In the first place, the amount for the ring I bought the other day hasn't even been debited...

As I stared blankly at the bankbook, I felt a sharp, intense gaze from behind and flinched.

"Haruna?"

Haruna is standing at the entrance of the room. Looking at me with sorrowful eyes...

"Tenchi, what are you doing?"

Haruna's sad eyes. The air is tense... But I have to ask.

"Haruna, what is the meaning of this?"

"Forget it, Tenchi. Forget about the bankbook, and about the girls from yesterday, all of it. Please!"

"....."

As I remained silent, Haruna continued to press me, her voice tinged with reproach.

"Tenchi, didn't you say you loved me! Didn't you say we would be together forever!"

"But Haruna... this world is strange."

When I finally managed to say that, Haruna clung to me tightly.

"What does that matter? Yes, this is certainly not the world you were born in. But what of it? What's wrong with that?"

"Every day... is exactly the same," I murmured.

At my words, Haruna cried out in a low, despairing voice.

"Isn't this the world *you* wanted?!"

"Mine?"

"Yes! A warm, gentle, ordinary everyday life. But if you say you hate it, I'll do whatever you wish, Tenchi! What do you want to do? Do you want to live a more luxurious life? Or do you want to become a famous painter? If you say you want it, I'll give you anything, even the universe. So please, stay here. Stay in this world! Tenchi!"

Wrapping her slender, pale arms around me as if to cradle me, Haruna continued to plead with me, her voice turning into a prayer by the end.

Through her trembling fingertips, Haruna's sorrow and an unbearable, overwhelming heartache washed over me, making it impossible for me to reject her.

"It's alright now, Haruna. It's okay. If that's what you want, I won't ask about the bankbook or the girls anymore."

"Really?"

Looking up at me with tear-filled eyes as if she couldn't believe it, Haruna looked even more heartbreaking.

Even as she desperately tried to hold onto me, somewhere deep down, Haruna had already given up on her own desires. Like someone who had given up on everything for decades, her eyes were dark.

Why? Why is Haruna so deeply sorrowful?

Unbuttoning the blouse of the still-sobbing Haruna, I kissed her soft skin, feeling a certain realization. I realized that I could never fill this sorrow...

Then, the desperate expressions of the girls from yesterday flashed through my mind. Who were they? Is it really okay for me to stay here like this?

But as I sank into Haruna's entwined, warming limbs, my mind eventually went completely blank.

Meen, min, min, min, min...

Zee—, zee, zee, zee, zee...

Meen, min, min, min, min...

Zee—, zee, zee, zee, zee...

The cicadas are crying.

This is the eternal summer.

☆☆☆☆☆

In a secluded corner of the mountains, a single tree was now about to reach the end of its lifespan.

Compared to living creatures, the lifespan of trees appears long at first glance. However, their fates are almost entirely left in the hands of others.

They do not move to avoid wind and rain, nor do they roam the mountains and fields in search of food for themselves. They merely take root in their destined place and quietly pass the time.

Without resisting life as it is... Perhaps that is the strength granted from heaven to trees in exchange for a body that lacks freedom.

But what if a human being were forced into the same fate as a tree...

Out of their own weakness, they would likely bring about their own ruin.

Masaki Katsuhito was now standing before that decaying old tree. He was the one who had decided the fate of this old tree. When he came to this land from a distant, foreign world, he had planted this old camellia tree here alongside the remains of his beloved.

The remains decayed, and eventually her lingering feelings traveled through the roots and took up residence in the camellia. Her lonely regrets accumulated right along with the tree's annual growth rings.

And now, the camellia is about to rot away.

Still harboring her loneliness...

Having knelt before the camellia for hours, gently stroking its trunk, Katsuhito stood up straight with absolute resolve and drew the Tenchi Sword, aiming it at the old camellia.

"Haruna! If you are going to take someone, take me!"

Shouting this, he brought the sword down upon the old camellia, and at the exact same moment, Katsuhito collapsed heavily on the spot.

☆☆☆☆☆

"Tenchi? What's wrong? You're staring blankly..."

Holding her dinner bowl, Haruna questioned him anxiously as Tenchi suddenly went dead silent.

Holding his bowl in his left hand and gripping his chopsticks in his right, Tenchi remained as motionless as a stone statue.

Driven by an intense anxiety, Haruna stood up and shook Tenchi's body.

"Tenchi?! What's wrong?"

At first, Tenchi allowed himself to be shaken like a wooden puppet, but eventually, he slowly raised his eyes and stared directly at Haruna.

"Haruna, I want you to give me back my grandson."

"Ten... Yosho?"

Haruna removed her hands from Tenchi's shoulders and instinctively stepped back.

The person in front of Haruna was Tenchi, and the voice belonged to Tenchi as well. Yet, Haruna felt without a doubt that the presence existing there was Yosho.

"Yosho, is that you?"

"Haruna."

As Haruna stared at him, looking utterly stunned as if possessed by something, Yosho stared back at her intently. The beloved woman he was never supposed to meet again—no, the woman he was never *meant* to be able to meet... Haruna, who was drowning in her own sorrow and attempting to drag their innocent grandson, Tenchi, down with her, might no longer be the gentle Haruna of the past. She might just be an evil spirit seeking to satisfy her own desires. Yet, looking at her face, the same old affection well up inside him.

Haruna continued to look at Yosho with disbelief in her eyes.

"Why are you here..." Haruna's voice, which she finally managed to squeeze out, was trembling.

"I want you to return my grandson, Tenchi. Haruna."

When Yosho said this again, Haruna shook her head violently.

"Even you are saying things like that? That boy, Tenchi, wanted to escape from the real world! That's why I granted his wish. I gave him the ordinary, warm everyday life he desired! Both he and I were happy every single day. What is wrong with that?"

Spitting out these words violently and aggressively, Haruna gave off a somewhat desperate impression. Facing her head-on, Yosho spoke quietly.

"But Tenchi is not me."

At Yosho's words, Haruna bit her lip. That was true. Tenchi was not Yosho. That was a fact Haruna had tried to deny, yet could never truly erase. The one Haruna loved was not Tenchi. The proof was that the Tenchi in this world did not look like the Tenchi of the real world. He was the spitting image of Yosho at the time they were separated by death. To the point where she could almost forget that the Yosho currently speaking to her was merely borrowing Tenchi's body...

Suddenly, as if completely unable to contain the violent surge of anger welling up inside her, Haruna lunged at Yosho, grabbing him.

"Yes! That boy, Tenchi, isn't you! He is a child carrying the blood of you and another woman! After I died, while I watched over you, I watched that boy grow up the entire time. Becoming more and more like you, carrying your blood... a child so precious, yet so detestable..."

Having said that much, Haruna, still clutching Yosho's arms, collapsed to her knees and hung her head.

"I... I wanted to live with you on this Earth. In the morning, at noon, at night, I wanted to be with you. Eating, sleeping, laughing... I wanted to live that kind of unremarkable, everyday life with you. When my body perished, I told myself it couldn't be helped that you would go on living with someone else, but I was so lonely... By rights, it should have been me with you... holding a child's hand like that... Thinking about it was unbearable! Seeing you smile so happily made you so precious, yet so detestable..."

Gently pushing Haruna's weeping hands away from his arms, Yosho enveloped her hands tightly within his own palms and spoke.

"I know, Haruna. I am not blaming you. So, take me with you."

"Eh?"

"I am sorry for making you feel so lonely. I am terribly late, but let us go together. Haruna."

Haruna looked at her own hands, firmly enveloped in Yosho's.

Hands she had waited for so long, hands she thought would never be joined again.

The hands that had gripped each other so tightly on that spaceship back then.

How she had longed for that warmth...

How happy she would have been if she could have taken that hand and walked to the ends of the earth...

And that child who was never born...

How happy the dream of living with that child and Yosho, the three of them together, would have made her...

Haruna remembered just how deeply she had loved Yosho on that distant day.

The Haruna of that time could never have imagined, even for a moment, that a day would come when she would hate Yosho.

The massive, ugly mass in Haruna's heart that had frozen over a long, long period of time...

At the warmth of Yosho's hands, her frozen loneliness and her cold, hardened, ugly heart seemed to begin melting away...

"Yosho, Yosho, I loved you...! I didn't want to hate you. I wanted to rejoice in your happiness... But, but an uncontrollably ugly heart wells up inside me. I can't suppress it! I am... I am..."

Clinging to his hands and sobbing, Haruna was gently pulled into a embrace by Yosho.

"I know. I know, Haruna. So, let's go together. This time, we'll be together forever and ever."

From within Yosho's arms as he held her gently, Haruna stared intently at him. How happy she would be if she could be held in these arms and simply rot away just like this... But, as if making up her mind, Haruna pushed his arms away.

"Haruna?"

Yosho looked at Haruna anxiously as she slipped out of his embrace.

"No, Yosho. If I could reclaim the lost time with you from now on, how happy I would be... But going with me doesn't mean that. No matter what we do now, we can never take back that time. It's funny, isn't it? I already knew that, for a long, long time. It's something I've thought about for a long, long time. Yet, as that boy, Tenchi, grew up to look exactly like you, I... dreamed a dream I shouldn't have dreamed... And so, I took advantage of that lost boy's feelings...

Yosho, you have people you love right now, don't you? You must not talk about passing away with me."

"Haruna, do you forgive me?"

"Forgive you? How could I..."

"But I... with Itsuki... Even though I promised you we would be together forever..."

"Yosho, I am dead. You are alive. My time as a dead person remains stopped, but your time is flowing. I knew that. I understood it perfectly well, but I was just so

lonely. I'm sorry. I am the one who should apologize. But this was the only way I knew how..."

"Haruna..."

"Goodbye, Yosho. This time, for real. Please tell Tenchi, tell that boy that I am sorry. Yosho... I'm so glad... that I got to see you at the very end..."

With a lurch, space began to distort.

Without a sound, the walls, the floor, the windows, and the townscape began to fade away. Even the eternal summer sky...

Haruna's world was on the verge of vanishing.

"Haruna, Haruna, Haruna!"

Yosho embraced Haruna's slender, gradually fading form so tightly it felt as though she might break.

Clinging to her body, knowing that this would truly be the last time he would ever hold her...

"Haruna?"

When Tenchi came to his senses, Haruna was already unconscious, lying limply in his arms.

However, even while his body was being dominated by Yosho's consciousness, Tenchi's own consciousness had remained inside him.

Tenchi had come to understand everything.

Where he had been all this time.

What this world actually was.

What Haruna's sorrow was.

Who the person Haruna truly loved was...

And how Haruna really felt about him...

“A child so precious, yet so detestable...”

"Haruna, it must have been painful for you. Looking at me every day... looking at me, who carries the blood of the man you loved and another woman... Haruna, I didn't know anything... In the end, I couldn't do a single thing for you..."

The woman he loved hadn't been looking at him... Rather than resentment over that fact, his heart ached when he thought of her sorrow. He felt a fierce anger at himself for being so ignorant of that pain. Even if he was just a substitute, if it would save her, if it would heal her even a little bit, he would throw everything away and go with Haruna... That was perhaps the ego born of love that had surfaced within Tenchi for the very first time.

As Tenchi placed his hand on Haruna's completely colorless cheek, tears streamed from his eyes, wetting Haruna's dry lips.

Right then,

“Tenchi.”

Haruna's voice resonated directly inside Tenchi's head.

"Haruna?!"

Tenchi instinctively looked at the Haruna in his arms, but her eyes remained tightly closed.

“Tenchi, I'm sorry. And, thank you.”

Hearing Haruna's incredibly gentle, warm voice echoing once more, Tenchi suddenly felt that Haruna was leaving his side forever.

"Haruna?! Haruna—!!"

Holding Haruna tightly, Tenchi screamed. But within his arms, Haruna's body gradually began to lose its outline. The walls, the chairs, the table—everything in Haruna's world was disappearing...

"Thank you." Haruna's voice, saying those final words, echoed in Tenchi's ears for a long time.

A gentle, motherly voice that had forgiven everything...

"Tenchi! Over here!"

In the middle of the vanishing world, a powerful voice called out to Tenchi, who was standing blankly, still chasing after the lingering afterimage of Haruna.

It was Ryoko, who had managed to enter Haruna's world but found it already dissolving, and had finally found Tenchi after a desperate search.

"Ryoko...?"

Seeing him look at her and call her name, Ryoko leaped at him out of sheer joy.

"Tenchi! You recognize me?!"

"Yeah, Ryoko."

As Ryoko clung to him, Tenchi felt the weight of the reality he had run away from.

"Then, you're coming home with me, right?"

Eyes staring straight at him. *Yes, I was afraid to look back into these eyes,* Tenchi thought. What had he been so afraid of? As long as his own feelings were firm, there was nothing to fear.

"Yeah, Ryoko. Thanks for coming to get me."

"Tenchi!"

Holding Ryoko as she clung tightly to him, Tenchi thought for the first time how precious she was. Even if he couldn't fully return those feelings right now...

"Hey, Ryoko, cut it out. Let's go home quickly. Ayeka and everyone else are worried."

Tenchi spoke while gently holding back the clinging Ryoko. Wiping away her overflowing tears with a swift motion, Ryoko beamed at Tenchi.

"Alright, let's move. Seriously, making us worry like that."

Tenchi looked all around him. The room where the two of them had lived was no longer there.

Suddenly, something glinted.

It was that matching pair ring that Haruna had worn so happily.

"Goodbye, Haruna. I won't run away anymore. Meeting you made me realize what's truly important."

Muttering this in his heart, Tenchi slipped the silver ring off his ring finger and tossed it down into Haruna's vanishing world.

The thin silver light, along with Haruna's sorrowful dream, dissolved and disappeared into the darkness...

"Thank you, Tenchi." Once more, that gentle voice of Haruna echoed in Tenchi's ears.

Deep in the mountains where autumn had settled in, a lone man stood still.

All around him, despite it being autumn, crimson camellia petals were mysteriously fluttering through the air.

"Rest in peace, Haruna," Katsuhito spoke to the withered old camellia tree. "I've been left behind all alone again, haven't I..."

When he had departed for Haruna's world, Katsuhito had been prepared to die. No, perhaps he had even desired death.

“My time as a dead person remains stopped. But Yosho, your time as a living person is flowing...” Haruna had said.

That's right. As long as you are alive, time flows.

And time is cruel.

It washes away even the sorrows you believed would never heal.

That might be the kindness of time, but the fading of sorrow becomes a double layer of grief, piling up inside one's chest.

Katsuhito looked up at the high, distant autumn sky.

"Haruna, Itsuki, Achika... You girls are unfair. Even though you left me behind, you live on inside me forever. I have no choice but to keep living for your sakes, do I?"

Katsuhito turned his back on the camellia and began to walk.

Tenchi had probably returned home by now as well.

Their boisterous, lively everyday life was about to begin again.

Whether Katsuhito's back could feel it or not, the figures of three women continued to watch over his retreating form for a long, long time...

Chapter 10:

17 Years Old-Autumn. Toward a New Future...

It is a magnificent, clear autumn day. The sky is endlessly high and blue, and the air, still harboring a trace of summer's warmth, feels gentle against the skin. The trees are changing color, the nuts are ripening, and roasted sweet potatoes taste delicious... Excuse me. The aroma was just so wonderful...

At Masaki Shrine, which has completely regained its usual boisterousness since Tenchi's return, Sasami-chan is gathering fallen leaves to roast sweet potatoes. As they warm themselves by the bonfire, Ayeka questions Ryoko.

"So, when are you going to ask him?"

"Ask him...?" Ryoko replies, pretending to be oblivious even though she knows exactly what Ayeka means.

"About Lord Tenchi's feelings, of course. Wasn't it you, Ryoko-san, who declared that you wouldn't be able to rest easy until you heard it clearly from Lord Tenchi's own mouth?"

That was indeed the case. The two of them, having grown completely serious, had made such a commendable resolution.

"Well... that's true, but..."

"When will you ask him?"

"Then why don't *you* ask him first?"

"My goodness... I am perfectly fine with going second. Please, go right ahead."

Ayeka shook her head vigorously, a look of absolute refusal on her face. Watching Ayeka's reaction, Ryoko desperately scrambled to think of an excuse.

"No, I mean, here's what I'm thinking..."

"Yes?"

"Well, as frustrating as it is, it looks like Tenchi was genuinely serious about Haruna. If that's the case, it means he just got his heart broken, right? I figured asking him at a time like this would be a bit... you know..."

"That may very well be true."

"Right?"

"Asking him right now would be rather... *inconvenient*, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, exactly. Inconvenient."

"In that case, let us save it for another time."

"Let's do that! ♪"

Ultimately, the heart of a maiden in love is a complex thing. They want to know the other person's true feelings, yet they dread finding out. They can ask in a joking manner, but asking with a straight face is terrifying.

Now, as for our young Tenchi, it seems he is actually standing in front of that notorious camellia tree. So, let's have Tenchi express his current state of mind from his own perspective, shall we? Bring us some closure on this matter!

Sigh, it’s autumn already. Back then, it was still spring, wasn't it?

Ryoko and Ayeka-san were having one of their usual fights over a bamboo broom or something, and when I stepped in to break it up, the conversation suddenly shifted to which of them I was going to choose.

Which one will I choose, huh?

I lay down flat on the ground. Beside me, a sketchbook lay discarded. After returning from the parallel world, I suddenly felt an overwhelming urge to draw, so I bought it. I'm still not very good, but I've started with sketches of landscapes and still lifes.

Dad says things like, "Hmm, genetics are truly amazing!" But come to think of it, Dad used to carry a sketchbook around all the time when he was in high school, too.

When I finally came home, Dad just said, "Welcome back," and didn't press me for any details about where I had been or what I had been doing. According to Grandpa, Dad apparently had a pretty awful time dealing with the police and everything while I was gone...

Grandpa hasn't spoken a single word about what happened since we got back. He only told me that I needed to give my proper thanks to everyone who helped me...

And it's true. Because of this whole incident, I caused so much trouble not just for Ryoko and Ayeka-san, but for Sasami-chan, Washu-san, Kiyone-san, and Mihoshi-san as well. All because my own feelings were so half-hearted...

But now, I think I finally understand. The most important thing of all is your own true feelings.

I feel bad for Ryoko and the others, but... at that moment, I really wouldn't have minded fading away into nothingness right along with Haruna. Truly.

...Because I loved Haruna.

Even if I had remembered everything about this world, I might have thrown it all away—Ryoko, Ayeka-san, the feelings of my dad and grandpa—and left anyway.

That's what it means to love someone, isn't it?

Even if you don't want to hurt others, sometimes you just do. Well, this time, I was the one who got dumped...

I think I've been arrogant until now. Thinking things like, "If I'm honest about my feelings, it might hurt the other person." But it hurts more when people won't tell you the truth. Being treated kindly out of pity is just empty. If someone hates me, I'd rather they just say it.

So, the next time I fall in love, I'm going to say it clearly. Not just to her, but to everyone around us. I'll say, "I love this person."

"The sweet potatoes are ready—!!"

It's Sasami-chan's voice.

"Hey, Tenchi. So this is where you were."

Ryoko appears, flying through the sky. "What were you thinking about?" she asks, looking concerned. She was the one who came to get me—even though I'd been heartless enough to forget her face.

"It’s nothing. Let’s go, Sasami-chan is calling."

As I walked alongside Ryoko, I offered a quiet apology in my heart.

I’m sorry, Ryoko. I’m sorry, Ayeka-san. For being such an indecisive man. But for just a little longer, I want things to stay like this.

I can’t decide which one to choose right now. But I know that when the time comes, I won't lie to my own feelings anymore. Even if it hurts someone, I’ll speak my true heart. So for now, I want to stay like this a bit longer.

It might be selfish. But being together like this... it’s probably only possible for this specific moment in our lives. Eventually, the time will come when we have things to protect, or things that bind us—a time when we can't stay as we are now. Until then, just for a little while longer, let me lean on everyone's kindness.

"Tenchi-niichan! Ryoko-oneechan! Hurry, hurry! The potatoes are going to be all gone!" Sasami-chan is waving and calling to us.

"Tenchi-sama! I’ve saved the biggest one for you!" Ayeka is smiling.

"Aaanh, Kiyone-e, it’s too hot, I can't peel it—" "Honestly, you’re so clumsy. Here, let me try... Ow, hot, hot, hot!" "Kiyone-dono, you’re not exactly one to talk, are you?" "Mya-on!"

Everyone is gathered around the bonfire, waiting for us. Ryoko and I started running toward them. *Thank you. Right now, I love you all so much!*

...Or so he says. Did you manage to understand Tenchi-kun's feelings? He still seems quite indecisive, but well, let’s forgive him just for this time.

Meanwhile, the "Old Men Brigade" is holding down the fort on the veranda. "Father-in-law." "Hmm?" "It’s a good season." "Yeah. A good season indeed."

Of course, they are likely referring to the lively group of young people. "But, getting older isn't so bad either." "I suppose so."

Memories become sadder the more they pile up, yet they still warm the heart. Katsuhito and Nobuyuki looked up at the autumn sky, each clutching their own memories in their hearts. A slight breeze picked up. The bonfire flared up with a *whoosh*, followed by a particularly loud burst of laughter. Fallen leaves spun and danced to the ground. Mixed in with the leaves, it felt as though a single red flower petal danced by, but perhaps that was just my imagination.

Epilogue

In a dim room, a man sits at a desk, leafing through a sketchbook. In that aged sketchbook, its corners darkened by fingerprints, page after page is filled with drawings of the same woman. Her expression is always the same: terribly kind, and terribly sad.

As the man stares intently at the woman's face, the sound of adorable footsteps suddenly echoes. *Pata-pata-pata-pata... BAM!* With a violent sound that didn't match her face, a girl—the man's daughter—burst into the quiet room. She was a lovely girl whose appearance seemed to suddenly brighten the room. She looked to be about five years old, her rosy cheeks and round eyes brimming with curiosity. In truth, this study was the man's sanctuary, strictly off-limits to others, but it seemed that rule was completely ignored where his daughter was concerned.

The girl began to look with great interest at the easel set in the middle of the room. On the canvas sat a sketch of a long-haired woman, the same one from the old sketchbook. "Oh, Papa, are you drawing again? Hey, who is this? She's pretty, isn't she?"

The man gave a wry smile at his daughter's precocious tone and began to speak. Wondering all the while just how much of this story a girl her age could understand...

"That was back before your father had even met your mother..."

The memory of that hot season was resurrected in the man's mind.

That eternal summer day...

Ah, today is just as hot as that summer day was...

Meen, meen, meen, meen... Zee—, zee. Zee, zee...

The cicadas are crying.

In Lieu of an Afterword

Kazuaki Morijiri

(Producer, Pioneer LDC)

At any rate, this is the final chapter. How did everyone enjoy *Tenchi Muyo! in LOVE 2: Distant Memories*?

Since this marks the conclusion, looking back on it all... and I know I'm preaching to the choir here, but the home video release of *Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki* originally started way back in September 1992. After that, the franchise expanded in all sorts of ways, from sequels to Director Negishi's TV series *Tenchi Muyo!*, the movie *Tenchi Muyo! in LOVE*, and so on. My very first encounter with *Tenchi Muyo!* was actually through the "Genesis Trailer."

It was a pre-release trailer featuring a carefree narration by Kikuchi-san, who said things like, *"Doesn't 'Tenchi Muyo' mean you shouldn't turn things upside down?"* At the time, my impression was just a mild *"Huh, neat,"* but I never imagined that I would eventually end up in charge of it. I took over the role from my predecessor, Yasuji Yamashita-kun, after he quit the company to embark on a "Midnight Express"-style journey around the world (his travelogue from that trip was published as a book by K-dansha. It's the story of a man who abandoned *Tenchi* to travel the globe, so please check it out if you're interested). I've been in charge of the series since right after Episode 6, and it has allowed me to travel all over Japan and gain so many incredible experiences—running events, hosting screenings, visiting Okayama, and going to ski resorts. A trip around the world sounds great, but this side of things was a whole lot of fun too.

Now, regarding the title *Distant Memories* (originally *Harukanaru Omoi*), I've actually grown quite fond of it. At first, I thought it sounded a bit cliché and even tried to brainstorm alternative ideas, but when you actually read the novel or watch the movie, it really tugs at your heartstrings. "Omoi" (feelings/memories/thoughts) is a simple word, but it carries an immense amount of depth. As the author Ramo Nakajima once wrote:

> **"...Because I always carry an *omoi* within me. It is the memory of that single fleeting moment on the mountaintop when your lips touched mine. A moment pregnant with eternity. A cross-section of that exact instant when the world was filled with silent music. The afterimage of that ecstasy is what I call *omoi*, and because I have it, I can somehow make it through until tomorrow... (*My Head Itches*)"**

Just like that, Haruna's *omoi*, and the distinct forms of *omoi* that Ryoko and Ayeka hold toward Tenchi, are eternal to them. Just how irreplaceable those feelings are comes through clearly from the screen.

It is something that can only be described as *omoi*—the kind of thing that, the exact moment you try to substitute it with any other word, immediately loses its color. Looking at it that way, I think *Distant Memories (in LOVE 2)* is a wonderful title. It's like seasoned kelp: the more you chew it, the more flavor comes out, and it's packed with plenty of DHA and great for your health to boot.

Whether you read *Distant Memories* or watched it, I believe that warm sensation left behind in your heart *is* your own *omoi* (and I wonder directed at whom?). If you can roll that feeling around in the palm of your hand and savor the lingering aftertaste, then I have achieved the absolute pinnacle of fulfillment as a producer.

Right now, the premiere screening has wrapped up, and we are currently scouting out a venue for the wrap party. Negishi-san, thank you so very much for your hard work over these past three years. There were times of joy, times of fun, times of frustration, and times of hardship, but looking back now that it's over, every bit of it was interesting. Filmmaking really is addictive, isn't it? The promotional campaign is about to begin, so please stick with us just a little longer until opening day. And hopefully, we'll cross paths again on some other project.

Lastly: while this specific story brings *Tenchi Muyo! in LOVE* to a close, as a *Tenchi* fan myself, I would certainly love to see a brand-new installment of *Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki* sometime in the next century.